



*The Song* (1919) by Leon Kroll (1884-1974).  
Source: Sotheby's. Artist's private collection (c.1919). By descent to the present owner.

## SYLLABLES OF VELVET SENTENCES OF PLUSH AMERICAN ART SONG AS PRAXIS

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In collaboration with Università degli Studi di Firenze,  
and the International Center for American Music (ICAMus)

Università degli Studi di Firenze  
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This presentation has been borne out of my deep interest in, and personal experience of, American art song praxis: both as a key influence within the wider scope of artistic curation, and in advocacy of the poet-composer-performer-audience continuum as an ethnographic vehicle of critical enquiry. The various ways in which the American art song composer, and their chosen poet/s, craft their respective materials offer not only a meaningful account of the singularly unique attributes of their shared creative identities, but also serves to reflect and capture singular moments within American cultural memory.

In designing the following narrative, I have taken direct cue and inspiration from the songs themselves: examples that illuminate the broad arc of American art song history: from its first inception to more contemporary trends. Presented as individual 'sonic and visual snapshots', yet curated to speak as a collective whole, each example has been carefully selected to commemorate a particular aspect of American socio-political and/or cultural legacy. In so doing, the poet, composer, and performer are ideally placed, as a dynamic conduit, to illuminate aspects of American cultural memory that may otherwise lay undiscovered, dormant, silenced, and forgotten.



Francis Hopkinson (1834) by Thomas Sully (1783-1872). National Gallery of Art.

**Francis Hopkinson** | 1737-1791  
*My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*  
(1759)

Although art song tradition in the United States is, in relative terms, 'young' compared to that of its Western Europe counterparts there nevertheless remains a critically important legacy of over two centuries' worth of song composition.

The birth of the American art song coincided with the birth of the country, with the first extant art songs credited to the composer, jurist, inventor, artist, essayist, Francis Hopkinson.<sup>1</sup> Hopkinson was a friend of George Washington, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and the only American-born composer for whom there is evidence that he wrote songs before 1800. After commencing his formal music training at seventeen, Hopkinson became known for his proficiency as a harpsichordist, organist, and psalmist. He is noted

<sup>1</sup> 'Francis Hopkinson'. *Biography*, Library of Congress. <https://loc.gov/item/ihas.200035713>

for his innovative experiments to improve harpsichord tone, by first “substituting crow-quills with metal tongues, then leather quills, and finally with velvet cork”.<sup>2</sup>



‘My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free’ (1759)). Original Score. Source: Library of Congress.

Hopkinson’s earliest composition, *Ode to Music* (1754), was shortly followed by his first song, *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*. Composed in 1759, it is a setting of the poem *Love and Innocence* by Irish clergyman Thomas Parnell. Scored for voice and harpsichord it exists as “the first extant secular song by a living American composer”.<sup>3</sup> Contained in a collection of Hopkinson’s manuscripts, dated from 1759 to 1760, the song is currently housed in the Music Division, Library of Congress.<sup>4</sup>

As was common performance practice at this time, Hopkinson composed the song in two parts - treble and bass - leaving the harmonic details to be determined by the accompanist. With a notably elegant and appealing melody, the song is “frequently punctuated by a repeated passing-note, resulting in a

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> ‘Francis Hopkinson’, Penn Collection, University of Pennsylvania. <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/francis-hopkinson/>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

charismatic syncopated rhythmic effect. A brief postlude concludes the piece.<sup>75</sup> The following performance features baritone Thomas Hampson accompanied by pianist Craig Rutenberg, in an extract from a live performance in 2010.<sup>6</sup> [My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free](#)



The Hutchinson Family (1845), Artist Unknown. Source: The Metropolitan Museum.

#### The Hutchinson Family | 1844-

1898

*Get Off the Track!* (1894)

The Hutchinson Family Singers were the first commercially successful American popular music act to fuse social protest with public music performance. The original members comprised of thirteen of the sixteen children of Jesse and Mary Hutchinson of Milford, New Hampshire. The eleven sons and two daughters "made their singing debut in the late 1830s and at first sang sentimental, patriotic tunes celebrating the virtues of rural life."<sup>77</sup> However, in 1842, they "began to more closely associate with the abolitionists, and soon their repertory of songs championed such reformist causes as temperance, women's rights, and above all, the abolition of slavery."<sup>78</sup>

Their public image soon became an amalgam of Christian revivalism, abolitionism, and agrarianism. This arguably aided their course by providing financial success and avoiding potential criticism of taking advantage of slavery issues. *Get Off the Track!* - an abolitionist song composed by Jesse Hutchinson Jr. in 1894 - is dedicated to anti-slavery and edited Nathaniel Peabody Rogers, as a "mark of esteem for his intrepidity in the cause of human rights."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free', Song of America. The Hampsong Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/song/my-days-have-been-so-wondrous-free/>

<sup>6</sup> 'My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free'. Thomas Hampson (baritone), Craig Rutenberg (piano), New York Philharmonic's Offstage and Barnes and Noble. 1 April 2010. Source: YouTube.

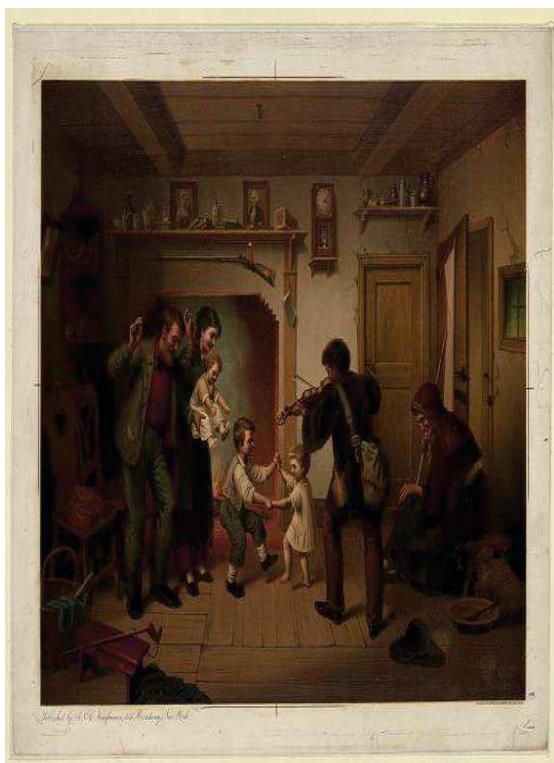
<sup>7</sup> The Hutchinson Family Singers. Gilman Collection. The Metropolitan Museum.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/283176#:~:text=The%20original%20members%20of%20the,the%20virtues%20of%20rural%20life.>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

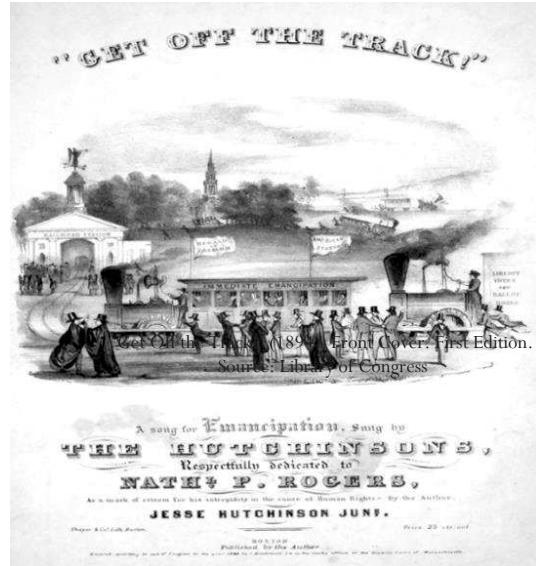
<sup>9</sup> 'Get Off the Track! A Song for Emancipation'. Original Score (1844). Published by the author. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661453/>

Unambiguous in its message about the direction in which America was headed, the song grafted an original anti-slavery lyric onto the borrowed melody of a racist tune. The result was not just a hit, but a newfound 'voice' for the abolitionist movement. The following 2013 recording features the Dutchess Anti-Slavery Singers: a faithful representation of the original arrangement, accompanied by banjo.<sup>10</sup> [Get Off the Track!](#)



'Power of Music' (1872), Duval and Hunter. Source: Library of Congress.

The advent of 'parlour music' - typically song composition and performance crafted for the domestic space - became one of the most popular American art forms in the 19th century. With a piano found in most nineteenth-century American middle-class homes, women typically burdened with domestic activities were also able to pursue creative practice outside of their daily routines – promoting a significant wave of female-led composition and performance at a time when the female artist's voice was often muted, if not silenced. The material itself was disseminated as sheet music, and the text commonly took its bearing from the works of European writers such as Robert Burns and Thomas Moore. It was in this inconspicuous, yet fertile arena, that the nineteenth-century American composer Stephen Foster, excelled.



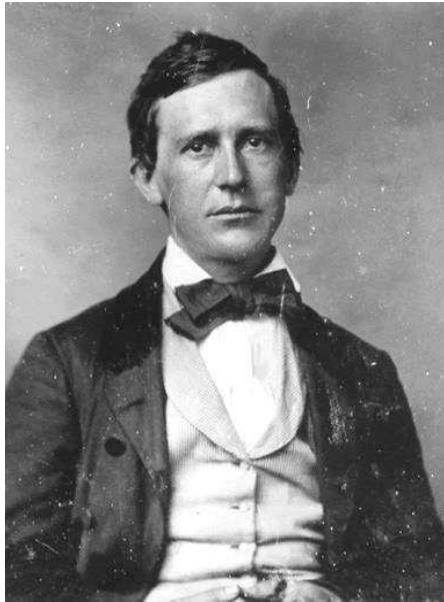
"Get Off The Track!" (1894). Front Cover. First Edition.

Source: Library of Congress

### From the Concert Hall .....to the Parlour!

By the early nineteenth century, dependence on a primarily English style of song composition waned as American composers searched for a voice of their own. Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, they found increased inspiration in the African American spiritual. A nationwide interest in the spiritual arose with the advent of steamboat travel, begun on the Mississippi in 1811, and with exposure to the minstrel show: the first national form of American musical theatre. It was from these Mississippi steamboats that Northerners became acquainted with the work songs and spirituals of the 'coloured folk'.

<sup>10</sup> 'Get Off the Track!'. Part of the Mid-Hudson Anti-Slavery History Project. The Dutchess Anti-Slavery Singers. First Congregational Church, Poughkeepsie, NYC. March 2013. Source: YouTube.



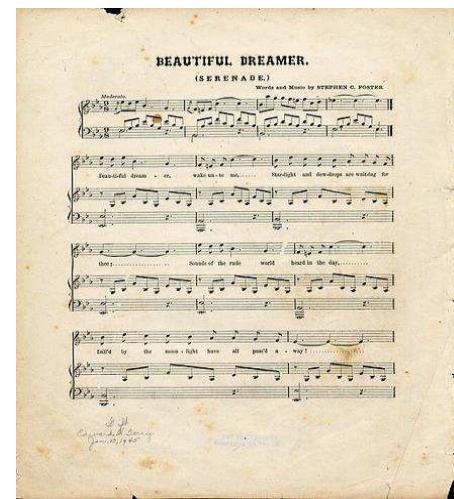
Stephen Foster (c. 1860). Source: Library of Congress.

**Stephen Foster | 1826-1864**  
*Beautiful Dreamer* (1864)

A “melodic genius with tender, sympathetic lyrics and infectious rhythm”<sup>11</sup>, Stephen Foster is often credited as ‘America’s First Composer’, and widely regarded as one of the first who “made professional song writing profitable”.<sup>12</sup> A self-taught musician, his poems, and melodies “were written in a simple manner, with remarkably little musical embellishment or complexity. His works mirrored a kind, modest, and sympathetic personality; and are widely considered the first genuinely American in theme: characterizing a love of home, temperament, river life and work, politics, battlefields, slavery, and plantation life.”<sup>13</sup> For his songs composed after 1860, Foster “turned his creative energy to the parlour ‘ballad’: a style of song noted for its sentimental or narrative text, frequently at a slow to moderate tempo.”<sup>14</sup>

The subjects of Stephen Foster’s ballads were “relatively free of minstrel-song influences, focusing on topics devoid of Southern themes, such as mother, love, and home.”<sup>15</sup> One of Foster’s most enduring and memorable balladic examples, ‘Beautiful Dreamer’ was written approximately six months before his death: where he was destitute, in poor health, and surviving by writing songs in haste and selling them for hardly any money. Here, we see Foster’s melodic genius at perhaps its very best: “exemplifying Foster’s final sentiments and retaining its place as one of America’s most beloved serenades.”<sup>16</sup> The following performance, recorded in 2018, features the soprano Nadine Sierra accompanied by Bryan Wagorn at the piano.<sup>17</sup>

[Beautiful Dreamer](#)



‘Beautiful Dreamer’ (1864). First Edition. Source: Library of Congress

Toward the turn of the nineteenth-century, composers also became more ambitious, turning their creative energies to the more serious ‘art song’. This trend was sparked by the decision of many American composers to study in Europe; where, as a result, they were exposed to German *lied* and French *mélodie*: song forms that emphasized the fusion of poetry and music. European-trained composers, including Edward MacDowell (1860-1908) and Charles Loeffler (1861-1935) expertly crafted songs that integrated European aesthetic values into works with uniquely American qualities.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Stephen Foster’. *The Songwriters Hall of Fame*. [https://www.songhall.org/profile/Stephen\\_Foster](https://www.songhall.org/profile/Stephen_Foster)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

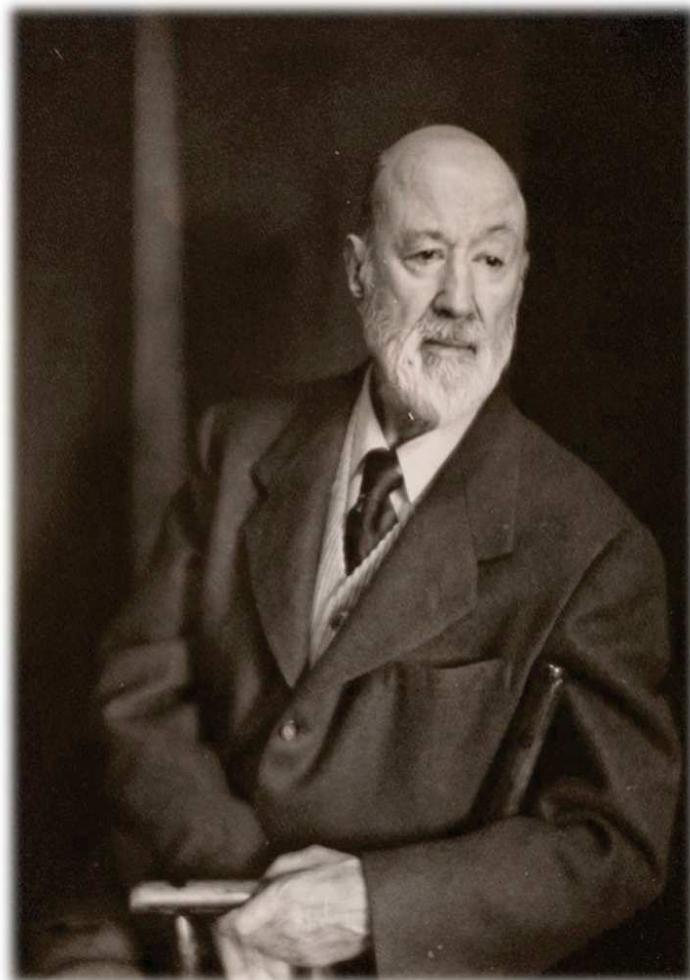
<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> ‘Stephen Foster’. *Song Collection* (‘Beautiful Dreamer’). Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200031150/>

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> An exclusive performance and conversation with soprano Nadine Sierra, celebrating the release of her debut album ‘There’s a Place for Us’ on Deutsche Grammophon. Bryan Wagorn-pianist. September 27, 2018. Source: YouTube.



Portrait of Charles Ives (c. 1947) by Clara Sippell

### Charles Ives | 1874-1954

*Charlie Rutledge* (1920)

Throughout the “thirty years of a creative life that left a legacy of highly original orchestral, piano, choral, and chamber works as well, Charles Ives continued to compose songs – some 150 by the time he abandoned composition altogether in the early 1920’s.”<sup>18</sup> Publishing them, Ives quipped, was “an act of ‘cleaning house’ – an ambivalent effort, both apologetic and proud, to lay before a public he distrusted ‘the autobiographical leaves of my soul’.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps “nowhere more so than in his songs can the myriad of Ives’s inspirations be heard—from German, French, and English Romanticism to the secular and religious Yankee tunes to Anglo-American ballads and parlor songs. Through the juxtaposition of these “subliminal sources, together with flights of unprecedented melodic and harmonic originality”, the composer “managed to create an eclectic personal and communal American diary.”<sup>20</sup>

(Art) song, for Ives, “served as a medium of creative dialogue—not only in the literal sense of narrative and lyrical communication between performer and audience, but also in the figurative one of a composer’s conversation with the Self.”<sup>21</sup> The immediacy and relative brevity of the song form “permitted Ives to remove his usual mask of well-bred reserve and to liberate a litany of uninhibited emotions in miniature carols that chronicle daily joys, sorrows, discoveries, and milestones.”<sup>22</sup> In 1922 Charles Ives self-published a discreet volume, containing “a very personal testament”.<sup>23</sup> None of the 114 Songs (as the edition was titled), which Ives had selected, edited, and ordered with great care, had ever before been issued. In the Afterword to the collection, the composer defended this sally into print after years of public silence as

<sup>18</sup> Hampson, T. and Verdino-Süllwold, C.M. *PBS-I Hear America Singing*, Song of America, The Hampsong Foundation. [www.songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/](http://www.songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/)

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

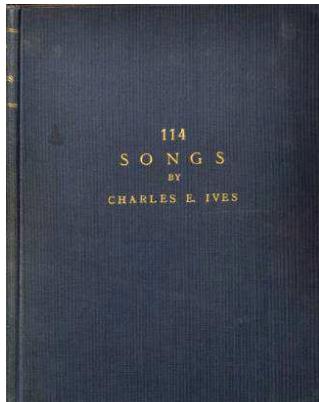
<sup>21</sup> Charles Ives, *Song of America*. The Hampsong Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/composer/ives-charles/>

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

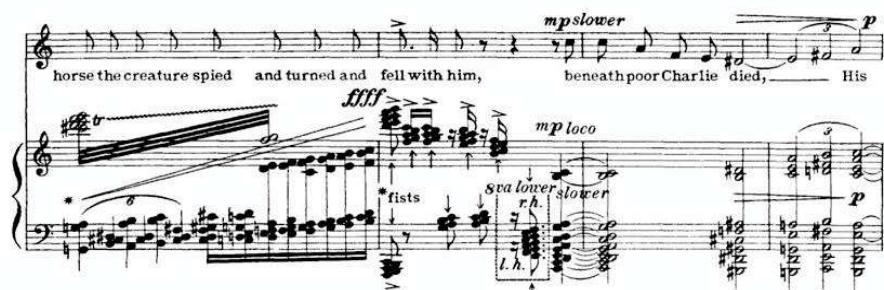
<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

an opportunity to evade a question somewhat embarrassing to answer: "Why do you write so much which no one ever sees?"<sup>24</sup>

That Ives "saw his edition of the *114 Songs* as a consciously ordered progression of musical and poetic thoughts is clear from the care which he took to arrange the works. His choice to open with one of his last completed songs, 'Evening', and to close with his first known composition, 'Slow March', reflects the composer's desire to embark on an autobiographical journey."<sup>25</sup> Between these bookends Ives "creates a multi-layered arrangement of melodies that reads simultaneously in linear and cyclical fashion. The songs march progressively through recollection, reality, and anticipation—through past, present, and future, as it were—at the same time as they meander cyclically from later life back to the childhood of memory."<sup>26</sup> More than becoming a sequential chronicle, however, Ives has in fact created, as his biographer Stuart Feder observed, a "Book of Hours".<sup>27</sup> Ives' song canon is a series of episodic moments linked by the tenuous threads of memory. Taken together they "chart an existential voyage which begins in temporal sensations and events and segues to the greater metaphysical passage."<sup>28</sup>



*114 Songs* (1923). Front Cover, First Edition.  
Self-published by the composer.  
Printed by G. Schirmer.



\*In these measures, the notes are indicated only approximately; the time of course, is the main point.

An extract from 'Charlie Rutledge' (1920), Source: Boosey and Hawkes. Bars 37-40

The text of Ives' song 'Charlie Rutledge' derives from the 1920 edition of *Cowboy Songs*, collected by John A Lomax. It was presumed anonymous at that time but in the 1938 edition Lomax ascribed it to one DJ 'Kid' O'Malley. The "cowboy heaven is one of Ives's many variations on musical evocations of the afterlife. But the stylistic range of this song far outstrips the normal requirements of a cowboy ballad, with its fanfares, clusters played with fists, and rhythmised speech".<sup>29</sup> The following performance features Abigail Levis, mezzo soprano Scott Murphree, tenor Mischa Bouvier, baritone Grant Wenaus, piano, and was recorded live in New York City in 2019.<sup>30</sup> [Charlie Rutledge](#)

<sup>24</sup> Ives, C. *114 Songs*. (1923). Self-published by the composer, printed by G. Schirmer.

<sup>25</sup> Ives, *Song of America*. op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Feder, S. *The Life of Charles Ives: Musical Lives* (1999). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Hampson and Verdino-Süllwold, op.cit.

<sup>29</sup> 'Charlie Rutledge'. *Charles Ives: A Song - for Anything*. Liner notes by Calum Macdonald (2005). Hyperion Records.

<sup>30</sup> 'Charlie Rutledge' Abigail Levis, mezzo soprano Scott Murphree, tenor Mischa Bouvier, baritone Grant Wenaus, piano. (2019), New York City. Source: YouTube.



Florence Price. Source: Naxos of America

### Florence Price | 1887-1953

*At the Feet O' Jesus* (1930)

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price began her studies at New England Conservatory at the age of 16. After earning her Artist's Diploma in organ, and a piano teacher's diploma, she returned to the South and taught in two schools before heading the music department at Clark University in Atlanta. She married in 1912, and in 1926, Price and her family moved to Chicago.

It was here that she began studying at the American Conservatory, initiating a compositionally prolific and creative period of her life. In 1932, she rose to national prominence when her Symphony in E minor won the Wanamaker competition and was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – “the first symphonic work by an African American woman to be performed by a symphony orchestra”.<sup>31</sup> She continued to teach and compose until her death in 1953.

Price is perhaps best known for her art songs, sung by many prominent singers of her day including Leontyne Price, Blanche Thebom, and Etta Moten. Her compositional style combines contemporary influences, such as those of the Harlem Renaissance and African American cultural heritage, with neo-Romanticism, which was popular among composers at that time. Price's song *At the Feet o' Jesus* exudes salvation. A setting of a Langston Hughes' poem *Feet O' Jesus*, it is an example of the black nationalist school of composition applied to the genre of art song, in the radiant key of E major. Its rich, warm harmonies and lustrous vocal melodies demonstrate, musically, that the composer's prayer has in fact been heard, that she basks not in the sea of sorrow that is the dominant image of Hughes's poem, but rather in the warm waters of salvation in Christ. The following performance features soprano Dr. Ollie Watts Davis, with Dr. Casey Robards at the piano, and is drawn from the 2015 documentary *The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence Price*.<sup>32</sup>

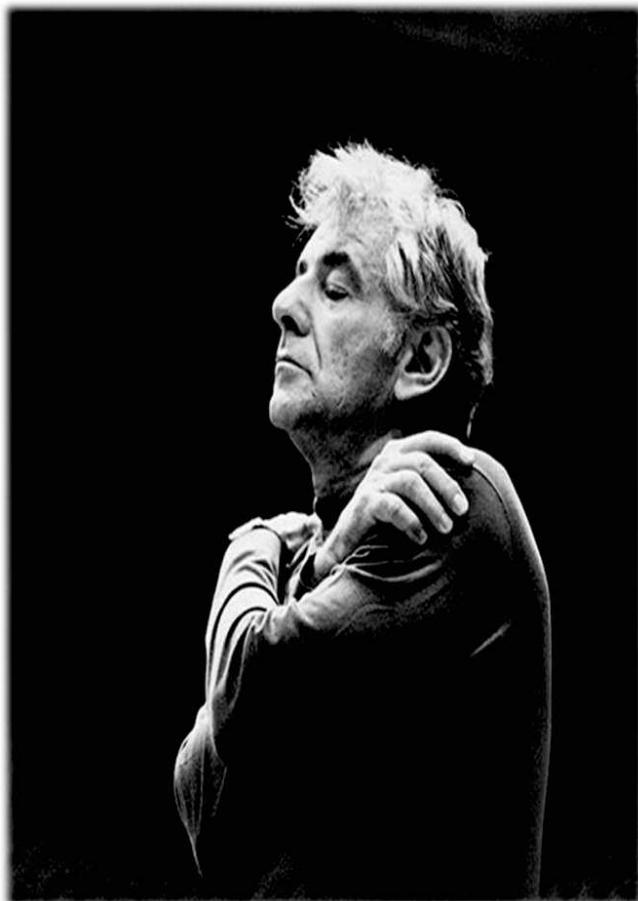
[At the Feet O' Jesus](#)



Langston Hughes. Photo by Jack Dalano/Getty Images

<sup>31</sup> Slonimsky, N. (ed.), *The Concise Edition of Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 8th edn, New York: Schirmer, 1994, p. 791.

<sup>32</sup> 'At the Feet o' Jesus', from *Two Songs* (1930). Text: Langston Hughes (1901-1967). Dr Ollie Watts Davis - soprano, Dr Casey Robards - piano. Extract from the documentary *The Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence Price* (2015) <http://thecagedbirddoc.weebly.com/>

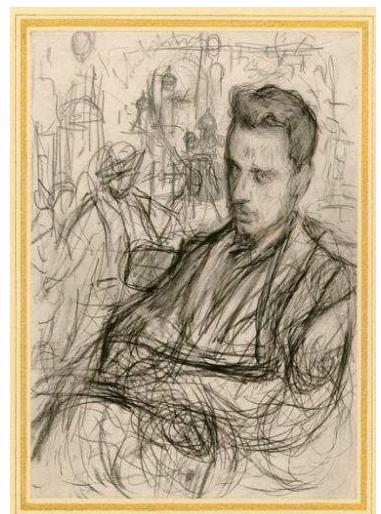


Leonard Bernstein. Source: Sony Classical

**Leonard Bernstein | 1918-1990**  
*Extinguish My Eyes* (1949)

One of the most renowned and beloved composers and conductors of the twentieth-century, the full remit of Leonard Bernstein's creative genius has been more acutely realized in the years following his death. Not only has Bernstein become increasingly esteemed for the "dramatic, driving force he embodied in classical music performance and education"<sup>33</sup> he is also widely acknowledged as "a composer of variety, vitality, and substance."<sup>34</sup>

Until literally a few days before his death Bernstein remained notably active: he continued to compose, conduct, tour, and teach with the energy and gusto that remained synonymous with his signature style. His flamboyant *elan*, his creative 'voice', his "larger-than-life, often unconventional persona"<sup>35</sup>, have become the stuff of legend, while his recordings, videos, lectures, books, and treatise remain vital contemporary artistic resource.



Portrait drawing of Rainer Maria Rilke by Leonid Pasternak. Unknown date.

<sup>33</sup> Hampson and Verdino-Süllwold, *op.cit.*

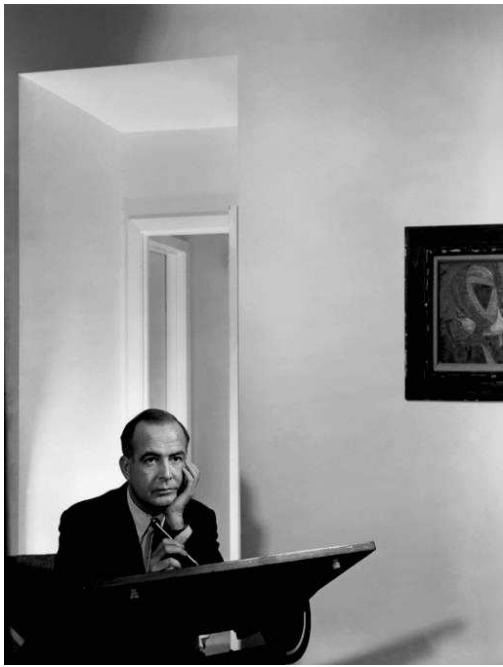
<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> 'Extinguish My Eyes'. Joyce DiDonato-soprano, David Zobel-piano. Source: You Tube. <https://youtu.be/-9tAUwqeqxg>

<sup>38</sup> Bernstein, L. 'Extinguish My Eyes', from *Two Love Songs* (1949). Text: Rainer Maria Rilke. Areli-soprano, Mark Evans-piano, Henry Zelenak-audio. 4 Aug 2020. Source: YouTube.



Samuel Barber (1956). Portrait by Yousuf Karsh.

**Samuel Barber** | 1910-1981  
*The Crucifixion* (1953)

Throughout his compositional canon, Samuel Barber “adhered stubbornly to his own inner voice—a voice rich in subtlety and sumptuousness that relied deeply on melody, polyphony, and complex musical textures, all fused with an unerring instinct for graceful proportion and an unabashed affinity for Romantic thought and emotion.”<sup>39</sup>

But perhaps it is through his song compositions that Barber “is at his most Romantic and impassioned”.<sup>40</sup> A trained baritone, Barber’s ‘love of poetry and his intimate knowledge and appreciation of the human voice inspired all his vocal writing’. John Browning asserts that throughout Barber’s life, “the composer was never without a volume or two of poetry at his bedside. Poetry was, Browning believes, as necessary to his existence as oxygen.”<sup>41</sup>

Renowned for his immaculate and considered choice of song texts, Barber decidedly embraced a wide variety of contemporary writers: notably key examples from the Georgian School, Irish bards, and the French Symbolists: the latter intimately connected with the linguistic experiments of the 20th century Irish writer James Joyce, and to contemporary American literary voices such as James Agee.

‘The Crucifixion’ is the fifth song from Barber’s *Hermit Songs*: a cycle of ten songs for voice and piano. Written in 1953 on a grant from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, the cycle primarily derives its content from a collection of anonymous poems written by Irish monks and scholars from the 8th to the 13th centuries, in translations by W.H. Auden, Chester Kallman, Howard Mumford Jones, Kenneth H. Jackson, and Séan Ó Faoláin. Robin Flower, writing in *The Irish Tradition* states: “It was not only that these scribes and anchorites lived by the destiny of their dedication in an environment of wood and sea; it was because they brought into that environment an eye washed miraculously clear by a continual spiritual exercise that they had that strange vision of natural things in an almost unnatural purity.”<sup>42</sup> Barber explains further: “The *Hermit Songs* are small poems, thoughts, or observations, some very short, and speak in straightforward, witty, and often surprisingly modern terms of the simple life they led - close to nature, their animals, and God. Some are literal translations and others were translated more freely (where existing translations seemed inadequate).”<sup>43</sup> The cycle was premiered in 1953 at the Library of



Author portrait of Vincent of Beauvais in a manuscript of his *Speculum Historiale*. c. 1478–1480, for Edward IV.

Source: British Library

<sup>39</sup> ‘Samuel Barber’, *Song of America*. The Hampsong Foundation. <https://songofamerica.net/composer/barber-samuel/>

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> Flowers, R. *The Irish Tradition*. (1993). Lilliput Press.

<sup>43</sup> Barber, S. *Hermit Songs*, printed preface to score. (1953) Boosey and Hawkes.

Congress, with soprano Leontyne Price and the composer as pianist. The following performance features mezzo-soprano Sarah Champion, with Dr Nico de Villiers at the piano, recorded in 2012.<sup>44</sup> [The Crucifixion](#)

**Libby Larsen** | 1950 –

*Try Me, Good King* (2000)

The American composer Libby Larsen stands as one of the most dynamic and influential composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. Whilst writing extensively for orchestras and mixed ensembles, she remains attracted to the qualities of the [human] voice. Besides her renowned contributions to the contemporary American art song canon, Larsen's more adventurous compositions include a cantata about Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as a multi-movement cycle entitled *Mary Cassatt* (1844–1926), which is performed with projections of Cassatt's paintings. In Larsen's own words, "Music exists in an infinity of sound. I think of all music as existing in the substance of the air itself. It is the composer's task to order and make sense of sound, in time and space, to communicate something about being alive through music."<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps through the medium of her art song compositions that we can best hear Larsen's own words in full magnification.



Libby Larsen. Source: Composer's website.



Ann Boleyn (c. 1501-1536), Second wife of Henry VIII. Unknown artist, English School (c. 1550)

Larsen's 2000 song cycle *Try Me, Good King* is a "group of five songs drawn from the final letters and gallows speeches of the first five wives of Henry VIII. Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, and Katherine Howard. Henry's sixth wife, Katherine Parr, outlived him and brought some domestic and spiritual peace into Henry's immediate family. Although her written devotions are numerous, and her role in the story of the six wives of Henry VIII is that of a peaceful catalyst, in these songs Larsen chose to focus on the intimate crises of the heart that affected the first five of the six wives. In this sense, the cycle represents a monodrama of anguish and power."<sup>46</sup> In conceiving the cycle Larsen "interweaves a lute song, composed during the reign of Elizabeth I"<sup>47</sup>, into each work. Whilst the original lute works "represent some of the finest examples of the golden age, they also create a tapestry of unsung words which comment on the real situation of each doomed queen."<sup>48</sup> The following performance of 'Ann Boleyn' (based on John Dowland's

<sup>44</sup> 'The Crucifixion' from *Hermit Songs* (1953). Text: an anonymous Irish monk, c. 8-13th-centuries, Sarah Champion, mezzo soprano, Dr Nico de Villiers, piano. 22 September 2012. Source: YouTube.

<sup>45</sup> Composer's official website.

<sup>46</sup> Larsen, L. 'Try Me, Good King': *Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII* (2000). Composer's introductory notes. Oxford University Press.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

lute song *If My Complaints*) was recorded in 2021 at the Holywell Music Room, University of Oxford, featuring soprano Nadine Benjamin and pianist Dr Nicole Panizza.<sup>49</sup> [Try Me Good King](#)

**Jake Heggie | 1961 –**  
*That I Did Always Love* (2014)

Although the American composer Jake Heggie has more recently focused his creative energies towards the operatic medium, he has nevertheless continued to systematically return to his musical heart and soul – storytelling through song. A committed advocate of writers and their literary legacies, sources of inspiration for his song composition included poetry by Maya Angelou, W.H. Auden, A.E. Housman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sister Helen Prejean, Gini Savage, Vincent Van Gogh, and Frederica von Stade, to name a few. However, there is perhaps one writer who has remained consistently central to his song canon: the American poetess Emily Dickinson.



Jake Heggie. Source: *The Primavera Project*. Photo by James Niebuhr



Emily Dickinson, daguerreotype (c.1847).  
Source: Amherst College

First introduced to Dickinson's work by his mentor, American composer Ernst Bacon, Heggie has since returned time and time again to her elliptic yet compelling verse. *That I Did Always Love* is the fourth song of Heggie's 2014 song cycle *Newer Every Day: Songs for Kiri*. Commissioned by the Ravinia Festival in celebration of Dame Kiri Te Kanawa's 70th Birthday, it received its premiere on 12 Aug 2014 at the Ravinia Festival, with soprano Kiri Te Kanawa and the composer at the piano. For Heggie, "Dickinson's evocative poetry, and Te Kanawa's luminous voice are a match both natural and inevitable".<sup>50</sup> Notably, many of the first texts Heggie "ever put to music were by Dickinson"<sup>51</sup>, and his first encounter with Te Kanawa occurred in the early 1980s "when he turned pages for her accompanist at a recital she gave at UCLA, where he was studying piano and composition".<sup>52</sup> The following performance features tenor Nicholas Phan, with Robert Mollicone at the piano, recorded live in January 2016 at the SF Performances salon at The Rex, San Francisco. [That I Did Always Love](#)

<sup>49</sup> 'Try Me, Good King': Last Words of the Wives of Henry VIII (2000). Text: Anne Boleyn (1501-1536) | 44:00  
*Till It Has Loved: American Art Song in Recital*. Nadine Benjamin - soprano, Dr Nicole Panizza - piano. Holywell Music Room, University of Oxford. 23 Sept 2021. Source: YouTube.

<sup>50</sup> Von Rhein, J. "A Diva in the Twilight of her Career Inspires New Song Cycle, at Ravinia". *Entertainment*, Chicago Tribune (2014).

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

Although a full account of the American art song tradition is beyond the scope of this presentation, it is hoped that the featured examples will serve as an invitation for further exploration and appreciation. The American art song, in its relatively brief journey, may not have traveled far but it has certainly traveled wide: from the Psalm settings, and hymns of the East, to the hillbilly and cowboy songs of the West; from the work songs of the North to the minstrel songs and African American spirituals of the South.

The songs featured within this presentation demonstrate the extraordinary range of American art song style proliferating during the past 250 years. The repertoire is unified through the sensitivity of each composer to the text; poetry afforded new momentum through the addition of layers of musical interpretation enacted by the performer in real time. Each song offers us, the audience, an opportunity to observe examples of cultural memory through somatic storytelling. It is perhaps fitting to suggest that, both in and through art song performance praxis, America's rich and complex history can be (re)read, heard, and assimilated - and therefore felt, lived, and experienced - anew.



'An Old Song' (1874) by William John Hennessy (1839-1917)  
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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MULTI-LEVEL DUALISM IN NED ROREM'S 'Grief'  
*Aftermath* (2002)

MARCO RAPETTI

---

When I am dead, even then,  
I will still love you, I will wait in these poems,  
When I am dead, even then  
I am still listening to you.  
I will still be making poems for you  
out of silence.  
silence will be falling into that silence,  
it is building music.

Muriel Rukeyser



This paper serves as a condensed account of the impromptu speech I delivered during the workshop organized by Dr Nicole Panizza, in collaboration with the University of Florence, represented by Prof. Mila De Santis on 18 May 2022.

I was very pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in this event for several reasons: first because I admire Rorem's music: especially his *Eight Piano Etudes* composed in 1975, and his piano concertos. In fact, I was introduced to Rorem by a friend of his, the composer David Diamond, whilst I was studying in New York at the Juilliard School. The second reason is due to my personal experience related to 11 September 2001, since the piece I am about to analyse was composed right after these catastrophic events. On that very day I landed on the West Coast of the US, just a few hours before the first airplane crashed into the Twin Towers.

In further extension of this presentation, I have added pictures I took while visiting New York. The first image, taken in the 1990s, features the Twin Towers (still standing near Battery Park in the southern part of Manhattan), followed by Ground Zero and the breath-taking Memorial built by Michael Arad and Peter Walker.

My presentation, 'Poetic(al) Antinomies and Multi-Level Dualism in Ned Rorem's 'Grief'', underlines notable peculiarities and structural aspects of one song selected from Rorem's song cycle *Aftermath* for voice, piano, violin, and cello. Commissioned and completed in 2002, Rorem scored ten songs based on texts by different poets. The text of the song in question is by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.



*Aftermath* is an English term impossible to translate in other languages without using a periphrasis. The word, derived from the language of agriculture, has gradually acquired a double meaning since it describes the consequence of a disaster but also the period when shock and grief make room for acceptance and healing.

Here, Rorem combines two kinds of sorrow: collective (linked to the experience of 9/11), and personal (stemming from the loss of a partner). However, it is important to underline the subtle difference between the term's 'grief' and 'sorrow'. Grief is an emotional process, while sorrow refers to the actual emotion.

## AFTERMATH (2002)

1. *The Drum* | John Scott of Amwell
2. *Tygers of Wrath* | Blake, (Marston, Housman, Arnold)
3. *The Fury of the Aerial Bombardment* | Richard Eberhart
4. *The Park* | John Hollander
5. *Sonnet LXIV* | William Shakespeare
6. *On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* | Walter Savage Landor
7. *Grief* | Elizabeth Barrett Browning
8. *Remorse for Any Death* | Jorge Luis Borges
9. *Losses* | Randall Jarrell
10. *Then* | Muriel Rukeyser

I initially noted that the first three songs ('The Drum', 'Tygers of Wrath', and 'The Fury of the Aerial Bombardment') mostly address the idea of war and destruction, and therefore collective grief. The following three songs focus instead on grief brought about by the loss of a beloved one. The song under analysis comes right after these two groups and appears to have a pivotal role in the cycle. In fact, Barrett

Browning's poem is a reflection on the very concept of grief, whilst the following two poems by Borges and Jarrell express (respectively) the idea of death as absence, and the hopeless banality of death due to war.



### ***GRIEF***

I tell you; hopeless grief is passionless—  
That only men incredulous of despair,  
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air,  
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access  
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness  
In souls, as countries, lieth silent-bare  
Under the blenching, vertical eye-glare  
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express  
Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death.  
Most like a monumental statue set  
In everlasting watch and moveless woe,  
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath!  
Touch it! the marble eyelids are not wet—  
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

ELISABETH BARRETT BROWNING  
(1806-1861)

The image and text (above) features Barrett Browning's poem, and a picture I took, in the English cemetery in Florence, of her tomb. The poetess (and her famous husband Robert Browning) spent a great part of their lives in Florence and were among the most important protagonists of the intellectual English community residing there at the time of the Italian Risorgimento.



Of note, it is a striking coincidence that three consecutive writers, specifically chosen by Rorem, are somehow linked to Florence. Walter Savage Landor spent most of his life in the Tuscan capital, becoming the owner of the Villa La Torraccia in San Domenico (now the seat of the famous Scuola di Musica di Fiesole). His tomb can be found quite close to his friend Elizabeth Barrett Browning's. Nearby is a gravestone marked with the names of Beatrice and Claude Shakespeare, the last descendants of the English bard.

The entire structure of Rorem's 'Grief' stems from a generative melodic cell (*Ur-Motif*) corresponding to a lower/upper neighbour (m2nd/M7th); a three-note motive occasionally presented incomplete with only two notes. The narrative curve of the song reflects traditional expectations for both life and music: three parts, representing a phase of growth, climax, and decay. It is interesting to note that the 'Golden Section' of the entire piece corresponds to bar 32 in the B section (climax), where 'express grief' is stated. Here, Rorem explores a loud dynamic range, while the *Ur-Motif* (upper neighbour) is split between voice and cello (C#-D-C#). This motive is presented in longer note-values (augmentation) after a trill used in the Classical style - serving as a signal preceding a cadence or an important structural point.



(in)complete 'upper neighbour' C#-D-C#. This example shows the doubling and splitting of the *Ur-Motif* in the voice and cello parts in bars 31-32, corresponding, as we pinpointed before, to the 'Golden Section' of the piece.

In consideration of the antinomies between the poetic text and music, one can note the words 'loud access' and 'shrieking' are set in *mezzo piano*, whilst the words 'vertical eye glare' correspond to a horizontal melodic line; 'in silence' is sung *forte*, and 'moveless woe' is expressed with jumping 2nds and 3rds from C4 to G5 in the melodic line. These apparent paradoxes may have been designed by Rorem on purpose, to emphasize the poetic content of the text.

- 'loud access', 'shrieking' → *mezzo piano*
- 'vertical eye glare' → horizontal melodic line
- 'in silence' → *forte*
- 'moveless woe' → jumping 2nds and 3rds from C<sup>4</sup> to G<sup>5</sup>

The dualistic principle we already mentioned on different occasions regards other aspects of the piece as well, starting from the most evident juxtaposition of silence - as a metaphor of death - and music - as a metaphor of life -, which correspond, on one hand, to the lack of passions mentioned in the text and, on the other, to the open expressivity of the song. The instrumentation of *Grief* represents a dichotomy, with only two sounding parts (the voice and the cello) and two silent instruments (the piano and the violin). In a

broad sense, we could interpret the relationship between the two protagonists, the voice reciting the text and the cello expressing its emotional content, with an analogy to what De Saussure called *signifier* and *signified* in linguistics.

- Piano and violin (soundless)  $\leftrightarrow$  voice and cello (sounding)
- Voice, instrument  $\leftrightarrow$  *signifier*, *signified* (De Saussure)
- TEXT (voice) = thought/mind/static state  $\rightarrow$  limited use of large intervals, tendency to move around a tone functioning as a *repercussio* in Gregorian Chant, 'strict' tempo
- MUSIC (cello) = emotion/body/movement  $\rightarrow$  large melodic leaps, broad dynamic range (no FF in the voice part), 'very free' tempo
- A tetrachord from the double harmonic major scale (C-Db-E-F) + a tetrachord from the natural minor scale/Aeolian mode (G-Ab-Bb-C)

Words can be seen as a metaphor of thought, as a mental product somehow detached from the body. Consequently, Rorem uses a limited number of large intervals, the melodic line tends to move around a tone functioning as a *repercussio* in Gregorian Chant, and the tempo is specified as 'strict'. On the opposite side, the cello part openly evokes emotion and bodily movements, which are reflected in the use of large melodic leaps, a wide dynamic range, and a tempo specified as 'very free'.

Another dualistic principle can be seen in the scale used by Rorem, formed by the combination of a tetrachord from the double harmonic major scale (C-Db-E-F) and a tetrachord from the natural minor scale/Aeolian mode (G-Ab-Bb-C).

26 7. GRIEF

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

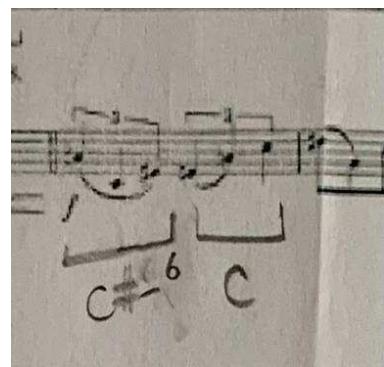
Very free ( $\text{♩} = 72$  to  $96$ )\*

Violoncello

Strict ( $\text{♩} = 76$ )

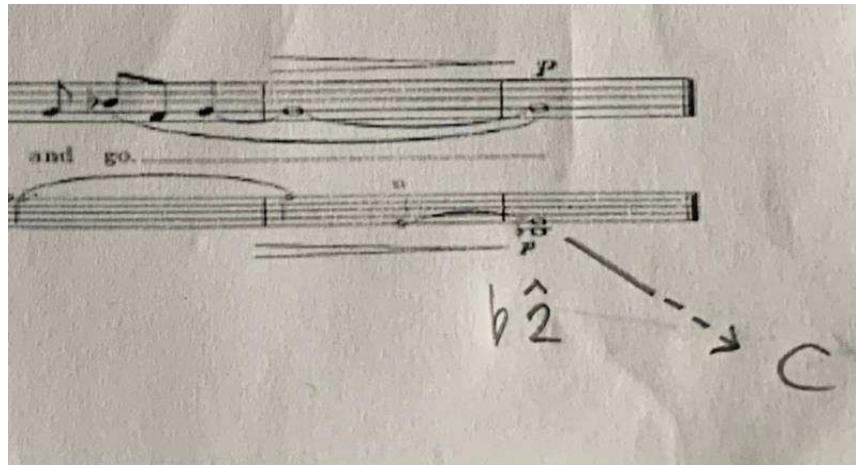
I tell you, hope - less grief is pas - sion - less;

A | *Finalis* C, *Repercussio* G (dominant)



B | *Finalis* F#, *Repercussio* C# (UN of C)

These images show the triadic structure of Rorem's song, corresponding to different tonal areas at the distance of a tritone (C-F#-C). Using again Gregorian chant terminology, we could say that the melodic line moves around the *finalis* C and the *repercussio* G in sections A and A', and around the *finalis* F# and *repercussio* C# in section B:



A' | *Finalis C, Repercussio G (dominant)*. The last note is an unresolved appoggiatura. The double stop in the cello part (there is only one in the piece), forming a tritone, sums up the entire structure and reflects the 'moveless woe' and the paralyzing effects caused by 'hopeless grief'.

The last note of the piece is an unresolved *appoggiatura*. The double stop in the cello part (the only one across the entire composition) forms a tritone, thus summing up the tonal structure of the piece. This unresolved tritone reflects the 'moveless woe' and the paralyzing effects caused by 'hopeless grief' mentioned in Barrett Browning's text: the D flat simply does not have the strength to resolve on C, as our ears would expect.

As we have seen, Rorem's style is based on traditional compositional principles which ensure his 'modern idiom' as easy to perceive and understand. Like most of his American contemporaries - from Copland to Bernstein, from Barber to Diamond - Rorem keeps a distance from the European avantgarde and sticks to a more conservative (and, consequently, more communicative) approach. The song cycle *Aftermath* comes to a magnificent conclusion with the song 'Then', set to a text by Muriel Rukeyser, which dissolves all previous antinomies by transforming the silence of death into a musical silence, hinting at a new life hidden under the motionless ruins of grief. As Rorem's piece testifies, music remains the most powerful means at our disposal to cope with sorrow and grief.



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'Songs From Letters': Calamity Jane to her daughter Janey (1880-1902)  
*Libby Larsen/Calamity Jane*

Marco Gallenga & Ruhama Santorsa

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*Preliminary Notes*

This seminar presentation focused on the relationship between poetry and music (within an American context), including active student participation. This work allowed for the modification of the application of the documentary research and musical analysis elaborated within the academic field - mainly addressed to euro-cultivated musical practice - to the analysis of texts and music of the American culture, having chosen the letters of Calamity Jane set to music by the contemporary American composer Libby Larsen.

The work was carried out in collaboration with doctoral student Ruhama Santorsa, and the discussion was stimulating and produced a fruitful exchange of ideas. I contributed two videos, one introductory and one final, which allowed us to creatively elaborate on the ideas offered by the material provided by Dr Panizza. Furthermore, the content of the letters and the fascinating and elusive figure of Calamity Jane allowed us to investigate not only the biographical aspects of the woman, but to assess her impact on the society of the time, and the legacy she left in contemporary society.

A stimulating and multifaceted workshop seminar allowed for a comparison between doctoral students and the discovery of figures in the artistic and musical spheres that we rarely have encountered in the canonical course of our studies, allowing for a stimulating and fruitful broadening of views.

...

The letters which Martha Jane Cannary Hickok (alias Calamity Jane) wrote to her daughter Janey, penned between the 18th and 19th centuries, served as the primary inspiration behind the song cycle *Songs from Letters*, by the American composer Libby Larsen.

I felt attracted to this topic: by the fascination I have for the 'Wild West' (of which, admittedly, my knowledge is relatively superficial and approximate), and by a subject that remains so current: the emancipation of women and gender equality.

The figure of Calamity Jane, as depicted in the opening video, has been a victim of the typical instrumentalization and distortion of the film market - show business *tout court* – whilst at the same time shaping a character, through the letters to her daughter, of which she herself has been a victim. A self-determination that within the fabric of history, between claims and shifts of ethical and social thinking, eludes an organic definition. Despite the propensity for 'marked fable', the known facts of her life are extraordinary.

She was, arguably, never involved in wars against Indians, and never assaulted Wild Bill Hickok's murderer with a meat cleaver. She may or may have not been a Pony Express driver, nurse, cook or a saloon lady. She was, perhaps for some time, a prostitute. She clearly was a scout and a famous performer in Buffalo Bill's touring show, fought alcoholism, and died at the age of fifty. She also assisted smallpox patients in Deadwood and took control of an overland stagecoach after the driver was shot. In other words, she had a rough life, in a completely different to the America of today.

Libby Larsen's song cycle elevates the lyrics to the status of true and legitimate poems: reaching for the heart of the subjects, allowing a deep, multi-faceted, emotional contours to emerge through a complex compositional style. This is precisely Calamity Jane's grand appeal: not a woman who through her actions and statements anticipated the feminist movement, nor a self-proclaimed flag bearer for gender equality ideals, but a strong fighter in a man's world. She does it for herself, for her daughter, for that atavistic survival sense which forces her to toss useless furnishings that weigh down her journey - therefore, exceeding the very same concept of equality by not imitating men, or barricading behind a marked femininity that doesn't belong to her. It is perhaps peculiar in how a letter to her daughter denotes the "shooter" (Calamity Jane) as never having killed a man, and that she would rather have killed a woman: "I still haven't killed anyone, but I'd really like to hit in the head certain Deadwood women", and further "General Allen is a friend of mine. Make sure you find him. I don't have girlfriends."

These truthful confessions, contained in the letters, are enriched with stories of events, places, characters, actions and daring adventures. But they don't conceal the heartache of a distant mother. They are mirrors of two souls. Calamity Jane: daredevil, strong, anti-conventional and Martha: mother, woman, worker, lover.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century - across the western world - customs, morality, and rights were still united in establishing male privilege and women's minority state. Modernization continues to progressively expand citizenship rights, but women - all women - are still excluded from political participation; believed to be incapable of act according to reason; subjected to the authority of their husband, are not free to manage their life and assets; withheld from many academic curricula and professions; and don't enjoy the same equality and treatment as men, typically within familial scenarios, and at the workplace. Many women work (e.g., factory workers, farmworkers, peasants, servants, homeworkers, small business owners, tailors, embroiderers), regularly pushed by economic necessity. However, the common social aspiration among them, as for upper class women, is that of being a bride, a mother: examples of female social modes that continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

A symbolic date, 26 August 1920, was the day in which the XIX Amendment of the American Constitution was approved in the United States. This act introduced universal suffrage: the apex of a long struggle by symbolic women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan Anthony, and associations like the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). However, these were not the years in which Calamity Jane lived. A stranger to all stereotypes, conventions, and constrictions - free from the crushing bigotry of the time - she is an ante-litteram feminist model.

Despite her memories being distorted, often with notably strong impact, they nevertheless contain the beginnings of the most radical forces of the feminist movement: those that, with many difficulties, will nevertheless prevail in the new century - through love, pain, rage, desire for redemption, and consideration. Will of freedom: a freedom that allows the individual to be, above all, their own self.

*Marco Gallenga*

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In addition to the video made by my colleague, Marco Gallenga, I (Ruhama Santorsa) propose a presentation that begins with an introduction to the composer Libby Larsen: an underlining of her works related to female characters, with various elements to better understand her aesthetic, particularly in relationship to vocal music. This will be followed by focus on the work object of study explaining choices reason and analysing Calamity Jane's characters between the text and the music. I will finish with some Larsen advice for performers and women in general.

## I. Libby Larsen

(composer, songs composition, female characters in songs)

Libby Larsen is one of America's most performed living composers. Her compositions include the major forms and structures: from large instrumental symphonies to chamber works, from choral pieces to opera. Through these works her vocal pieces emerged because they deal with different issues often written by men but from a female point of view such as old age (*Late in the Day*, 1998)<sup>53</sup> but also with issues rarely approached by men such as childbirth (*The Birth Project*, 2015).<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, she often chose strong female characters (like *Eleanor Roosevelt* (1996)<sup>55</sup>, the wife of Henry VIII in *Try Me, Good King* (2000)<sup>56</sup>, or Michele Antonello Frisch in *Center Field Girl* (2007)<sup>57</sup>). Arguably, the medium of art song is where her real affinity for both American cultural reference, and strong female characters, can be fully recognized.

During an interview Larsen declared that is true that she has an affinity for setting text written by women, she is a woman and, for her, "the texts that women write to represent themselves, whether prose or poetry, tend to be authentic, honest, and direct; with women it's much more common to have a concrete, personal speaker".<sup>58</sup> After that she started thinking about ctively seeking texts with this kind of poetic 'authenticity': texts where the author is making a strong statement from the self.<sup>59</sup> She had already unconsciously moved in that direction with *Cowboy Songs*, in which one of the songs, 'Bucking Bronco', has this sense of poetic 'authenticity'.<sup>60</sup> But *Songs from Letters* was the first composition where Larsen became fully aware of her interest in setting the voices of strong female characters.

This is the reason why I decided to choose these songs. My research, although based in a different century, is focused on women and female characters, but with this workshop we had the opportunity to study for the first-time music and text both written by women, instead of a female character described by a man's words and music. Additionally, we were able to study composition written by a living composer who explained her aesthetic and way of composing.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Music set to poems by Jeanne Shepherd, from the perspective of a septuagenarian.

<sup>54</sup> *The Birth Project*: a cycle of 12 songs related to pregnancy, birth, and related feelings.

<sup>55</sup> A dramatic cantata based on Eleanor Roosevelt's life and words.

<sup>56</sup> Featuring the last words of five wives of Henry VIII.

<sup>57</sup> An ode to the female ball player. The no-girls-allowed policy of baseball re-directed Frisch's talent into music, where she became a professional flautist.

<sup>58</sup> Libby Larsen, Interview by Meredith Du Bon, 27 April 2011, St- Paul MN.

<sup>59</sup> Larsen: "I found I wanted to add to the repertoire for female voice by pursuing this and allowing the singer to become the speaker of the text".

<sup>60</sup> The poem is attributed to Belle Starr.

<sup>61</sup> N.B. Songs for soprano and piano based on female themes. Please refer to References and Further Reading for further details.

## II. Approaching Text and Thinking Musically (within vocal music)

The relationship between text and music is very important for Larsen. She said that “music comes from the languages that people use to communicate with each other. It is the text that we kept returning to as source material, for ‘eventually you might hear it as music’.<sup>62</sup>

### i. Speaking the Text

She is very careful with texts that she’s thinking about ‘musicalizing’. She is vigilant with herself to get her ego out of the way and let the text settle itself naturally. The use of prose allows Larsen the flexibility to approach the setting of the text in a much more natural and non-restrictive manner. The setting becomes more like the characteristic rhythm of conversation in the American vernacular. When Larsen chooses texts, she pays attention to the way the rhythm of the words interacts with textual meaning and try to set texts as naturally as she can because, for her, words are prevalent and “the music must be more meaningful to the words than the words are meaningful to the music”.<sup>63</sup> Larsen states “if I am vigilant enough a third voice emerges, and this is what we heard as the songs [...] The third is the collaboration of the possibility of music and of text coming together”.<sup>64</sup>

### ii. About Music

Larsen defines the basic elements of music as:<sup>65</sup>

**Pitch:** a frequency, pure and un-mouldable, but subject to interpretation in the approach and execution. It is related to melody and intervallic content.<sup>66</sup>

**Motion:** used as definition of the concepts of meter/rhythm. She said that, on the one hand, human culture is always in motion, never in strict time; on the other, motion depends on cultural perception.

**Architecture:** stands for “structures”. She believes the traditional forms are mostly irrelevant in today’s musical society.

**Emotional impact:** music evolves due to culture more so than due to performance practice.

I think that two other elements should be added to those mentioned above:

**Horizontal conceptions:** related to line and harmony. She conceives tonality with horizontal meaning; the line comes first and the harmonies result.

**Rhythm:** her approach is to listen for natural rhythms in the world, she listens to people speak and takes rhythmic dictation in her head and transfer it to paper. When a person speaks, they have a pulse, each person has a pulse.

Almost all the individual aspects of the music in *Songs from Letters* arise out of the text, including the development of the melodic lines. Larsen usually sets the melodic lines syllabically to mimic the organic rise and fall of American language.

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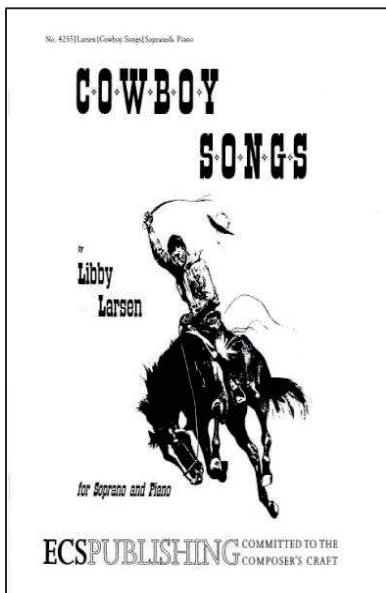
<sup>62</sup> Libby Larsen Website: <https://libbylarsen.com/themes/text-music>. Internet; accessed 18 July 2022.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Strand Katherine, *A Socratic Dialogue with Libby Larsen: On Music, Musical Experience in American Culture, and Music Education*, in *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, Mar. 2011, pp. 52–66.

<sup>66</sup> Intervals [generally] have a particular significance in her music.



©Cowboy Songs' cover

### iii. Songs of the Old West

Larsen's way of depicting the Old West is unique because, on the one hand, she would not romanticize the cowboy culture and American Western themes (like common tendency) and on the other, she experienced an "honest and full of characters" West and presents it from a feminine perspective. Her compositions expand our thinking of the traditional heroic male model in real and imagined events of the Old West to include strong, yet sensitive feminine figures like Calamity Jane and Belle Starr.

Larsen composed two different groups of songs with texts connected to the Old West: *Cowboy Songs*, and *Songs from Letters*. Calamity Jane's life was a complex dance between societal expectations and her own personal vision. Larsen is curious both about Jane's position as a woman in a male driven world and in her efforts to balance her own life and interests with her role as a mother. These ideas are as prevalent today; they engage the changing of gender roles, and the topic of feminism in American history.

### iv: Songs from Letters

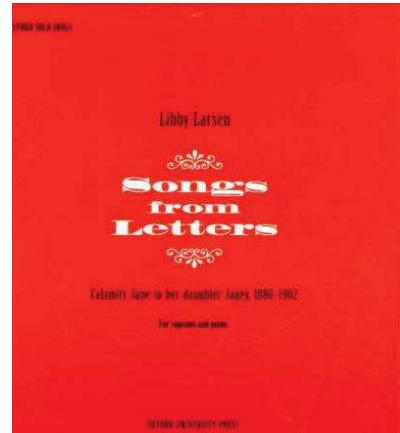
(choice, "fictional" character, character from letters)

The cycle is scored for soprano voice and piano or chamber ensemble (including flute, clarinet, piano, strings, and percussion). The following serves as an analysis of the score for soprano voice and piano.

Larsen states "...the composition reveals the struggle of an individual soul, a tender soul, a woman and a pioneer on many frontiers", that she is interested in "the character and the real person, her 'rough-toughness' and struggle to explain herself honestly to her daughter, Janey".<sup>67</sup>

Jane's texts and words reveal her desire not only to express her lived experience, as a woman living within a male-centric world, but to also share these stories with her daughter as an act of love, care, and maternal responsibility.

The character of Calamity Jane is multi-faceted. Throughout her letters we can find:



©Songs From Letters'

<sup>67</sup> Libby Larsen Website: <https://libbylarsen.com/works/songs-from-letters-calamity-jane-to-her-daughter-janey-1880-1902>. Internet; accessed 18 July 2022.



Martha Jane Canary, MS071 Vincent  
Mercaldo Collection

- **A loving mother** who always carries with her a ‘tiny picture’ of the daughter, who ‘call Janey for Jane’, who gambles to win money so she ‘can go to see you in style. I want to look like something once in my life’.<sup>68</sup>
- **A strong woman** with a horse called Satan, ‘dressed in men’s pants & posed as Wild Bills partner’, who sad that she ‘can live in this old world without love or without a home of any sort’.<sup>69</sup>
- **A nurturing woman** who looks after different boys and girls abandoned by their parents even though she knows that they won’t be grateful, who ‘couldn’t eat a mouthful if I saw some poor little brat hungry’.<sup>70</sup>
- **A jealous woman** who ‘lost everything I ever love except [Janey]’.<sup>71</sup> for jealousy.
- **A working woman** who worked in Russell’s saloon and joined Bill Cody’s Wild West Show.<sup>72</sup>

As a song cycle, *Songs from Letters* leads the listener through various stages of Calamity Jane’s life and embrace the “colorful dramatization of her character”.<sup>73</sup> Larsen chose some of the previous characteristics to emphasize Jane’s warm and loving side in addition to her wild and rowdy personality.

### i. Analysis

The contrasts of tender and wild, loving and rowdy are perfectly reflected in the structure of the cycle. Movements 1, 3 and 5 are introverted and contemplative, expressing the tender side of Jane:

1. **So Like Your Father’s** (1880) *Freely, recitative*  
Recalls Jane’s emotions and reflections upon the past after receiving a photo of her daughter. These reflections inspired Larsen to treat the song in an introspective and contemplative musical manner
5. **A Man Can Love Two Women** (1880) *Calmly*  
Displaying Jane’s thoughts about jealousy and how these suspicions affected her life and love
6. **All I Have** (1902) *With flexibility throughout*  
Draws upon Jane’s thoughts about all she has left in her life and in the world.

<sup>68</sup> Calamity Jane, *Calamity Jane’s Letters to Her Daughter*. San Lorenzo, Calif, Shameless Hussy Press, 1976.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

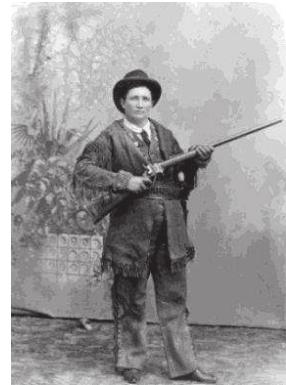
<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> She also presented the way in which she thought other people see her: a **crazy woman** for the Sioux who never molest her and a **lonely woman** who “once loved & lost a Little girl like you”.

<sup>73</sup> Secrest Glenda Denise, ‘*Songs from Letters*’ and ‘*Cowboy Songs*’ by Libby Larsen: Two Different Approaches to Western Mythology and Western Mythological Figures, in *Journal of Singing – The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing*. 64, no. 1 (2007), p. 23.

Movements 2 and 4 are more exciting and thrilling, suggesting Jane's flair for adventure and action. These are two action-packed and extroverted songs.

2. ***He Never Misses*** (1880) *With abandon*  
Presents Janey's father abilities as a shooter and a cowboy who never misses a shot
4. ***A Working Woman*** (1882-1893) *Slowly, freely, recitative then jaunty*  
a song in which Jane describes each of her many jobs expressing some pitfalls of her 'working woman' character.



These contrasting movements create a well-balanced cycle for soprano voice. Larsen crafts a musical structure that supports the intimacy of Jane's literary voice.

**Martha Jane Canary,**  
Photo C.E. Finn, Livingston,

### ii. Music Characteristics

I would like to present the distinctive features of Larsen's music through some examples in this cycle.

#### a. Recitative, tritone and contrary motion

The first example is about three Larsen's composing features: recitative, tritone and contrary motion. It is taken from the first song: *So like your father's*

Example 1 "So Like Your Father's," mm. 1-3

Larsen's first example of **recitative** with silence in the accompaniment to the voice and the omission of fixed time signatures create a sense of female connection, an immediacy, a desire for communication and enhance the emotion and solitude that Jane feels. Larsen has annotated the vocal line as *quietly*, suggesting the quality of Jane's character in this moment. Vocally, the singer should utilize a quiet dynamic, symbolizing the distance that Jane is feeling from her daughter. The quiet vocal line coupled with the silence in the piano part

symbolizes Jane's isolation and loneliness in her recollections. Recitative is often without accompaniment or with a single initial chord because it is used as a compositional device to draw a focused attention to the text.<sup>74</sup>

In these bars we can also find the first **melodic tritone** motive between the words – “a letter” combined with the very first leap the voice sings. Larsen uses tritone to add pungency to the text and using that as a vocal feature, she wants to represent the emotional contour of Jane’s life or a moment of heightened emotion or tension. In this example the tritone put emphasis on the word “letter” thus I believe that Larsen’s intention is to show to the audience Jane’s excitement for the reception of this letter.

Larsen usually utilizes the tritone compositionally in various ways, in fact one bar after, the initial piano motive in **contrary motion** of four octaves ends with another **harmonic tritone**. This one, as a pianistic device, is used by Larsen to establish a harmonic freedom; the triton stands as “the metaphorical significance of being unsettled, being able to move in any direction”<sup>75</sup>. The tritone in these first instances symbolizes the discord and unrest that Jane is experiencing in her life.

The following examples are about possibly the most important musical characteristic used by Larsen in this cycle: Motivic development and repetition.

### b. Motivic development and repetition

Repetition in this song cycle serves dramatic, psychological, and musical significance. Dramatically, repetition and musical return serves as a metaphor for Jane’s own memory. The psychological effect felt by returning musical material remains unique to each song, depending on where the return is heard (i.e. in the vocal or piano lines).

I will now present different examples from each song of repetitions both in piano and vocal lines.

#### First song – *So like Your Father’s*

- In the piano line: the **bell motive**<sup>76</sup> (Example 2). This will recur throughout the cycle and particularly at the end in the final movement ‘All I Have’, creating a psychological conclusion for the ear (Examples 3 and 4). This use of similar motives by Larsen to begin and end the cycle (but also every song of the cycle) increases the psychological connection and emotional journey undertaken in the cycle.

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<sup>74</sup> Again, we can find her feeling of loneliness described with a recitative without accompaniment in the Fourth song with the words “I mind my own business but remember the one thing the world hates is a woman who minds her own business”, score m. 44.

<sup>75</sup> Secrest, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> Another convention features hidden meanings such as the bells in *Try Me, Good King*. There are a vast number of symbolic meanings for bells, depending on the song.

Example 2: "So Like Your Father's," mm. 4–12

Example 3: "So Like Your Father's," mm. 13–17

Example 4: "All I Have," mm. 46–48

- In the vocal line: the repetition of "Like your father's, brought back all the years" (Example 2-3). These are Jane's personal memories, with Larsen symbolizing this reflection by the return of the musical material. In this instance, repetition serves as a symbol for Jane's memory, psychologically it is a symbol of Jane's nostalgic emotion.

### Second song – *He Never Misses*

- There are two motives in piano line: that of **galloping horse hooves** (Example 5) and the **gunshot** (Example 6). These motives are symbolic of both the sounds that is associated with Jane's life and the specific persona of Wild Bill Hickok. The galloping hooves and the gunshot motives

alternate repeatedly creating an aural connection to the action expressed in the text and a sense of suspense in relation to the longer lines of the voice. The galloping hooves' motive returns at the end of the song and is described by Larsen as the final shootout. This return creates a dramatic effect: the dramatic end of the story for Jane:

- In the vocal line: we find the repetition of three verses:

"I crawled to the brush to warn him" four times with higher pitch level and doubled by the piano; "The blood running down his face" at a higher pitch level (Example 8) and "Bill killed them all" also at higher pitch level that illustrate moments of suspense, heightened emotion, tension but also the hysteria and thrill Jane felt:

Example 5 - He Never Misses, mm. 25-27

### Third songs – *A Man Can Love Two Women*

- In piano line: we hear the **rock-a-bye motive** in the first two measures (Example 9). This motive ends with linear and vertical tritones, lending more evidence to the unsettled nature of Jane in her recollections of her life. We hear it again in the final four measures, serving as a motivic frame for the song: the motive symbolizing Jane's emotional disconnection from her feelings of jealousy that ruined her relationship with Janey's father. The indication of *calmly* symbolizes the notion that Jane has relinquished her feelings of jealousy. However, when repeated in 'All I Have' the calm motive changes: utilized in a more frantic manner, slowly building an emotional climax as the vocal line rises in tessitura (Example 11). It exists as a metaphor for Jane's growing frustration that all she has left are her memories.

Example 9: "A Man Can Love Two Women", mm. 1-2

Example 10: "All I Have," mm. 25–29

- In the vocal line: the most notable example of repetition is 'I lost ev'ry thing I loved': repeated three times - intentionally and with rhetorical effect. Larsen states: "When we want to make a point in advertising classes or if you take classes in emphasis, people will say 'three times.' It is just a cultural phenomenon, so I consciously use the repetition of three, with a variation in each one as a cultural tool."<sup>77</sup> For each repetition the two leaps became bigger and there is a dynamic augmentation which could symbolize both frustration and sorrow.

Example 11: "All I Have", mm. 14–23

#### Fourth song – *A Working Woman*

- In piano line: the keyboard imitates a **'tacky' piano motif** (Example 12), reminiscent of an out-of-tune saloon piano.<sup>78</sup> It is also heard in the vocal line ‘run me out of town’ in different measures (Example 13); in ‘when my back is turned’ with rhythmic augmentation (Example 14), and in ‘damn their soul to hell’ (Example 15).

Example 8: “A Working Woman”, m. 51-52

Example 7 - *A Working Woman*, m. 15

Example 6 - *A Working Woman*, m. 7

Example 15: “A Working Woman”, mm. 58-63

In vocal line: Jane repeats the text ‘damn their souls to hell’ again three times (Example 15). Larsen displays the more violent and aggravated nature of Jane, with each repetition and variation of pitch level and rhythm. These repetitions at increased pitch level are the perfect opportunity for the performer to show their power in the cycle.

#### Final song – *All I Have*

This song does not introduce any new motifs, but rather repeats former motifs that tie the whole cycle together. The motifs (as heard earlier in the cycle) adopt different connotations by its conclusion.

<sup>78</sup> This motif ends with a tritone.

For example:

- The 3/4, calm motive of 'A Man Can Love Two Women' appears fragmented - with a varied bass line in the piano accompaniment. These motivic differences illustrate Jane's growing agitation as she realizes that all she has left in the world are just the pictures of Janey and Bill. The change in the piano accompaniment from calm quarter notes (crotchets) and half notes (minims) to all quarter notes (crotchets) with an accent on the third beat express exasperation and desperation. This simple piano bass line is another metaphoric 'utterance' of Jane's memories. 'A Man Can Love Two Women' symbolizes her memories of jealousy and her resignation: 'All I Have' symbolizes frustration.
- Two motives serve as the final frame and conclusion for the cycle. The first is the return of the initial memory motive, it symbolizes Jane's memories of her daughter, and her daughter's father (Example 16-17). Larsen marks this moment as if Jane is lost in the moment of that memory. In return, the second and final motif is the 'bell motif' (Example 18). This circular motivic effect brings closure, both musically and emotionally, to the cycle.

Example 9: Initial memory motive  
"So Like Your Father's", mm. 4-5

Example 10: "All I Have", m. 20-21

Example 11: "All I Have", mm. 46-48

Larsen's cycle invites the listener to consider Jane, via musical syntax and gesture, as an emotionally complete woman, with a depth that her contemporary audiences may have never known.

### c. Rhythm, Word Painting and Harmony

Now the last three musical characteristics.

## Rhythm

Larsen's use of rhythm derives from the flow of the text: 'music springs from language of the people. [...]. This music can be derived from the rhythms and pitches of spoken American English'.<sup>79</sup>

The cycle features many changes of meter.

In the third song we discover a fluctuation between two different contrasting rhythmic-metric groups: use of 3/4 at moments of calm, and 4/4 at moments of anger and frustration. When the text and music become increasingly more frustrated, the time signature switches to 4/4, with Larsen instructing the singer to 'fiercely' attack the notes (Example 19). This alteration, between calm and anger, evidence Larsen's understanding of Jane's double character, by musically evoking her conflicting emotions.

Calmly (♩ = 56)

*a tempo ff* *fiercely* >

*fiercely*

*ff*

It kills love.

### Example 12: “A Man Can Love Two Women”, mm. 1-2, 7

## Word painting

Larsen also **paints the text** with a measured hand. Word painting creates emotional effect in the music. Examples include:

- The leap of *quarta eccedente* between the word ‘father-wild’ [*He Never Misses*, m. 3]
- The notes referred to the word ‘Hickok’ that are the same of that used for the first shoot (Example 20)
- The leap of minor sixth on the word ‘wild’ [*A Working Woman*, m. 24]
- The most immediate route to understanding the ‘leap’, through the word ‘air’ which evokes the meaning of the words “throwing it into the air” through music. (Example 21)

<sup>79</sup> Matthew Balensuela, *The Composer – Libby Larsen: Composer Emphasizes Rhythm in Her Music*, September 5, 1996, <http://mama.indstate.edu/users/swarens/larsen3.htm>



Example 20: "He Never Misses", m. 4

Example 21: "A Working Woman", mm 29, 33

Finally, there is **harmony...**

Larsen's style can be recognized by its rhythm more than in a consistent use of harmonic language. In this cycle we don't find conventional functional harmony: she omits key signatures and fosters harmonic freedom by removing a formal tonal centre, replacing it with musical cells that serve as metaphoric portrayals of the tensions and resolutions within Jane's life.

## V. Technical Difficulties

*Songs from Letters* presents the singer and pianist with a range of potential challenges. The following notes, by the composer, illustrate the complex nature of these songs: individually and collectively:

- The melodic lines are structured to follow the natural rise and fall of the American vernacular; therefore, the singer must have a good command of diction.
- I think that one difficulty is in the frequent transition between the more introverted and calm movements, in which the vocalist should show more intimacy and sensitivity and the fast and rowdy movements that need more vocal flair and power. This required an excellent vocal balance for the performer.
- It is important for the performer to follow the direction of the songs and the story to convey the correct intensity during the cycle.
- In the second song the use of dissonance combined with the fast tempo make the song quite difficult to perform
- The third song requires in-depth character development from the singer, and unravelling the different emotions is very challenging.
- The fourth song however requires the ability to shift from one emotion to another rapidly, from calm to violent and its extended range makes it very challenging.

Larsen gives three additional pieces of advice for singers that wish to perform her repertoire:

1. Prepare your ear. Larsen is extremely considered about offering references regarding pitch, but not in an obvious way. She states that singers “need to be prepared to relate to the music, to feel secure in the pitches, to listen because she does not directly support the vocal line”.<sup>80</sup>
2. Practice your consonants. Be prepared to use them.
3. Practice stamina because Larsen writes for advanced performers.<sup>81</sup>

Regarding the technique/s required to interpret her vocal music Larsen suggests being careful, with the idea that dynamics may rise and fall with pitch. In romantic performance practice it need only be used when required, because her music may often alter the audience’s experience of the words.

Larsen supports the notion that vocal music first derives from the text, and that if the singer has thought carefully about this (from the standpoint of ‘meaning’), the singer will avoid interpretation informed by standard practice. The relationship of motives between voice and piano is also central to a singer’s understanding of the music, and the power and purpose of motivic development.

## VI. Teaching Prompts

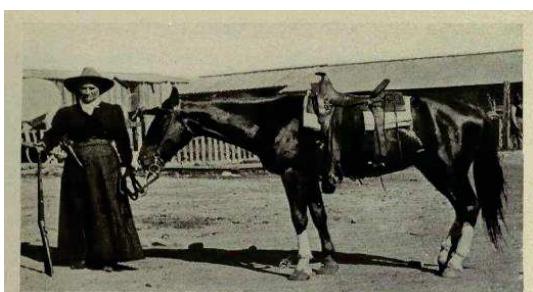
Like Larsen, Calamity Jane was a woman trying to make it in a man’s world, and the tension of competing with men caused her to forge her own style. Experiences, as felt by Calamity Jane, hold many similarities to what some women composers experience. The American female composers of our past, had to conquer obstacles of lack of education, opportunity, and ideological gender roles to live the lives they wished for and to compose the music they desired.

A word of wisdom to young women in music in this time, Larsen states:

“Walk through any door as yourself. Meet every situation at the crossroads of respect. There are skills involved. Be vigilant about what you need and insist on getting it. If someone says no, go to someone else. Find people to work with you. It is about self-realisation. It is also a matter of creating your own opportunities. The key is not asking permission. Go around the gate. Gather people around you who want to sing and do what you want to do.”<sup>82</sup>

One hundred years later, Calamity Jane’s life sheds light on contemporary society.

*Ruhama Santorsa*



Calamity Jane in 1885

<sup>80</sup> Libby Larsen, *Interview by Meredith Du Bon*, 27 April 2011, St. Paul, MN.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

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## Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs*

Teresa Poggiali

During the mid-30s I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. The old "special" public of the modern-music concerts had fallen away, and the conventional concert public continued apathetic or indifferent to anything but the established classics. It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.<sup>83</sup>

Thus in 1941 Copland explained the change in writing that, in the previous decade, had led him to begin that phase of life which would later be dubbed 'imposed simplicity': in fact, he decided to question the purpose of his modernist aesthetic in favour of a simple musical language, reached between 1932 and 1936 with the symphonic composition *El Salón México* and that, through the use of popular and folkloric melodies and elements, had to be accessible to a wider audience. In line with this new style, during the winter of 1950 Aaron Copland completed the first collection of *Old American Songs*.

The first set of *Old American Songs* was completed in 1950 and William Warfield gave the first performance in New York on January 28th, 1951.

1. *The Boatmen's Dance*. Published in Boston in 1843 as an "original banjo melody" by Old Dan D. Emmett, who later composed *Dixie*. From the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University.
2. *The Dodger*. As sung by Mrs. Emma Dusenberry of Mena, Arkansas, who learned it in the 1880's. Supposedly used in the Cleveland-Blaine presidential campaign. Published by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Our Singing Country*.
3. *Long Time Ago*. Issued in 1837 by George Pope Morris, who adapted the words, and Charles Edward Horn, who arranged the music from an anonymous original "black-face" tune. Also from the Harris Collection.
4. *Simple Gifts*. A favourite song of the Shaker sect, from the period 1837-1847. The melody and words were quoted by Edward D. Andrews in his book of Shaker rituals, songs and dances, entitled *The Gift To Be Simple*.
5. *I Bought Me A Cat*. A children's nonsense song. This version was sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs, who learned it during his boyhood in Oklahoma.

The second set, comprised of five more adaptations of *Old American Songs*, was finished in 1952, being presented for the first time at the Castle Hill Concerts.

1. *The Little Horses*. A children's lullaby song originating in the Southern States — date unknown. This adaptation founded in part on John A. and Alan Lomax's version in *Folk Song U.S.A.*
2. *Zion's Walls*. A revivalist song. Original melody and words credited to John G. McCurry, compiler of the *Social Harp*. Published by George P. Jackson in *Down East Spirituals*.
3. *The Golden Willow Tree*. Variant of the well-known Anglo-American Ballad, more usually called *The Golden Vanity*. This version is based on a recording issued by the Library of Congress Music Division from its collection of the Archive of American Folk Song. Justus Begley recorded it with banjo accompaniment for Alan and Elizabeth Lomax in 1937.
4. *At The River*. Hymn Tune. Words and melody are by Rev. Robert Lowry, 1865.
5. *Ching-a-Ring Chaw*. Minstrel Song. The words have been adapted from the original, in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University.

Figure 1: A. COPLAND, *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*, Boosey & Hawkes, London 1952, p. 2.

On a visit to London shortly afterwards, he played the songs to Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, who were so fascinated by them that they staged their first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival on 17 June and made a first recording. In America they made their debut on 28 January 1951 at Town Hall, with Copland at the piano and the famous Afro-American baritone William Warfield on vocals. The great success of these delightful songs convinced Copland to write a second collection in 1952: "Everyone seemed to enjoy singing and hearing the first set of folk song settings so much that I decided to arrange a second group of five".<sup>84</sup> The *Old American Songs* thus became ten in total (five for each cycle) and the first complete performance took place on 24 July 1953 at the Castle Hill Concerts in Ipswich, Massachusetts, again by the Copland-Warfield duo. Both cycles were later arranged for voice and small orchestra and achieved great success, many performances, and excellent recordings. The centrality of these songs in Copland's oeuvre became such that some were performed in 1979 when the musician was honoured with the prestigious Kennedy Center Honor Awards.

In contrast to the elitist character of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1949-50), the composer's interest in American vernacular traditions finds its greatest fulfilment in the arrangements of these songs for male voice and piano. As stated by the musician himself on the first page of the vocal-orchestral score, the sources of reference were many. Of various

<sup>83</sup> COPLAND, A. *The New Music: 1900-1960*, W. W. Norton, New York 1968, p. 160.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

inspirations, in fact, the pieces deal with different themes: political and religious, folk, and theatrical. Three are Protestant hymns and religious chants: 'Simple Gifts' was a favourite of the Shaker sect, dated from 1837-1847 and the music and lyrics were taken up by Edward D. Andrews in his book of rituals, songs and dances called 'The Gift To Be Simple'; 'Zion's Walls' was a revivalist song published by George P. Jackson in *Down East Spirituals* whose original words and melody were attributed to John G. McCurry (compiler of *Social Harp*); 'At the River' was a hymn born from the verses and music of Rev. Robert Lowry in 1865. 'The Boatmen's Dance', 'Long Time Ago', and 'Ching-a-Ring Chaw' are rooted in the American minstrel tradition and are excerpts from the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays in Brown University. Two of them are children's songs: the nonsense 'I Bought Me a Cat', sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs who had learned it during his childhood in Oklahoma, and the lullaby 'The Little Horses', originating from the Southern United States and taken up by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Folk Song U.S.A.*

The cycle finally is completed by a satirical piece that had been used during the 1884 presidential campaign, 'The Dodger', which was published by John A. and Alan Lomax in *Our Singing Country*, and 'By the Golden Willow Tree', a variant of the Anglo-American ballad commonly called 'The Golden Vanity' that Copland first heard for banjo and voice in a recording issued by the Library of Congress Music Division from its collection of the Archive of American Folk Song.

It was probably this multiplicity of reference models that led Howard Pollack to conclude that the *Old American Songs* provide "a diversified portrait of America itself".<sup>85</sup> Based on the sketches preserved at the Library of Congress in Washington, these collections are in fact the result of a decade of work and rethinking. These papers shed light on the compositional process: specifically, they reveal how the cycle assumed its final conformation through processes of omission and addition.<sup>86</sup>

In this sense, when analysing the sets one cannot overlook the historical-political period of reference, which was decisive for many of the author's choices; not so much because the *Old American Songs* are the Cold War aberration one might think of if one only takes into consideration the dates of their publication (1950 and 1954, respectively), but rather because they are the fruit of a preoccupation that accompanied the musician over a period of more than ten years. Indeed, it must be borne in mind that in the 1950s the symbolic power of Afro-American singing could be politically too dangerous for a composer with a left-wing past, and the social-political climate therefore prompted Copland to reformulate the collections several times, not only by modifying the selection of pieces to be included, but also through textual omissions and changes.

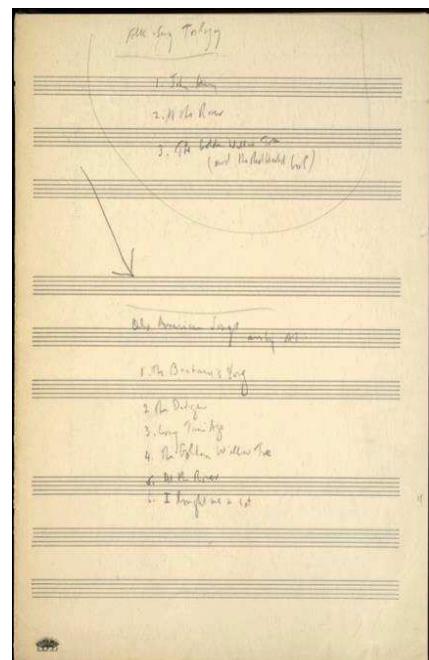


Figure 2: Sketch from *Old American Songs*, Second Set, Aaron Copland Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>85</sup> POLLACK, H. *Aaron Copland. The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*. (1999). Faber & Faber Ltd, London. p. 468.

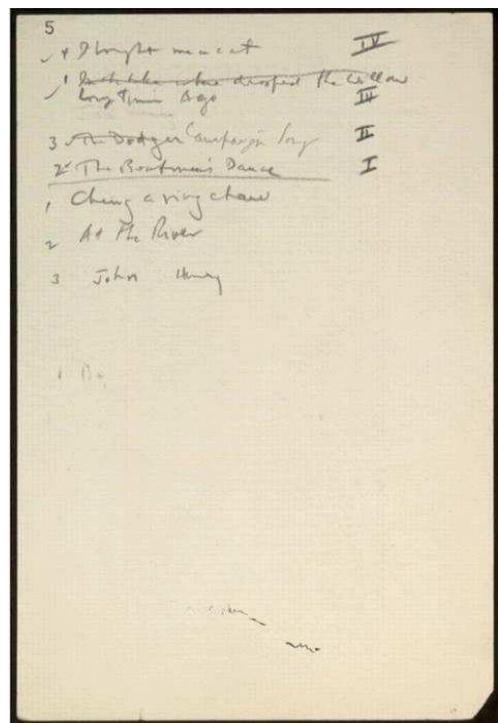
<sup>86</sup> HARTFORD, K. *A Common Man for the Cold War: Aaron Copland's "Old American Songs"*, in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 98, Issue 4, Dec. 2015, p. 320.

The sketches for *Old American Songs* seem to illustrate the cycle's continual expansion — from a trilogy to a set of six pieces, to a set of seven, and, finally, to a cycle of ten. 'John Henry' is the sole exception to this continual development. The first dated sketch, dated 9 June 1941, shows that Copland had initially grouped *Three American Folk Melodies*: 'John Henry', 'At the River' and 'Simple Gifts'; we know, however, that 'John Henry' is absent from the final version of the *Old American Songs*, and it is the only melody mentioned in the manuscripts that has no place in the published collections. The musicologist Kassandra Hartford argues that 'John Henry' figures in so many sketches that it is difficult to imagine that Copland simply changed his mind about its musical value, but there were political reasons to omit the piece.<sup>87</sup> In fact John Henry is an Afro-American folk hero who, in most versions of the folk song and tale at the risk of his life, wins a battle against a steam drill with his hammer. In the 1930s, however, the story stood in not only for the battle between man and machine, but also for that between labourers and the forces of capitalism and its protagonist soon became the brave "hero of the greatest Proletarian epic ever created".<sup>88</sup> It's not a case, indeed, that 'John Henry' was widely performed and recorded by Popular Front-affiliated artists, including Sonny Terry, that Copland held in high esteem.

Since the musician was unable to render the potential political meanings of this song harmless, he decided to take it off from the collection. In removing this piece, therefore, Copland eliminated an icon of the Popular Front, as well as an American folk tale that foregrounded the plight of labour, particularly black labour, in American history; the exploitation of black labour, indeed, was a dangerous theme at the outset of the Cold War.

If the exclusion of John Henry from the collection is an eloquent element in understanding Copland's choices, equally significant is the late inclusion of the song 'Zion's Walls', taken from George Pullen Jackson's collection *Down East Spirituals*, because Jackson was a judge for, an intellectual luminary and performer at the White Top Folk Festival, and his work as a folk collector in many ways aligns with the festival's racial politics. In his work, Jackson even went so far as to locate the origins of the spiritual tradition in the British Isles: although the Afro-American spiritual was the best known, the musicologist wanted to acknowledge its Anglo-Saxon roots, going so far as to assert that Afro-Americans "had made British and Baptist music their own", thus upsetting the view given in 1934 article *Negro Revolutionary Music* by left-wing journalist Richard Frank:

While it is the music of an oppressed people, [African American music] still possesses such virility that it has an irresistible attraction for ruling-class whites, [...] who for generations in one form or another have made Negro music their own.<sup>89</sup>



**Figure 3:** Sketch from Old American Songs, First Set, Aaron Copland Collection  
Library of Congress

<sup>87</sup> *Ivi*, p. 323.

<sup>88</sup> SCHATZ, P. *Songs of the Negro Worker*, "New Masses 5", n. 12, May 1930, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> FRANK, R. *Negro Revolutionary Music*, *New Masses* 11, n. 7, May 1934, p. 29.

But the contemporary historical-political context convinced Copland not only to reformulate the *Old American Songs* through his choice of melodies, but also to make several textual changes that contributed to reframe the pieces: an approach taken by the musician right from the elaboration of the very title of the collections. What were initially called *Three American Folk Melodies* or *Folk Trilogy*, through the erasure of the term ‘folk’, soon became the *Old American Songs*. The works thus sidestepped the thorny implications of ‘folk’ — and its popular front associations. Reference model for the new title was the score of the *Harris Collection of Poetry and Plays*, which were described on the frontispiece as *50 Old American Songs (1759-1858)*. By conceiving the cycle as a series of ‘Old American’ songs, Copland thus came to evoke an imagined and idealised common American past “that transcended traditional distinctions between urban ‘popular’ and rural ‘folk’ songs, and that ultimately left the tensions of both Copland’s time and the imagined past unspoken”.<sup>90</sup>

Copland made several significant textual changes to songs, nullifying their political charge. This is the case, for example, of ‘The Dodger’, written as a campaign song, that originally included seven verses: Copland’s final setting includes only three, those about the candidate, the preacher, and the lover. The composer decided to omit the social figures of the doctor, the merchant, the lawyer, and the peasant so as not to risk being accused of comparing the economic situation of the country man to that of his richer, stingier neighbours.

So, in general, several of the *Old American Songs* were modified or musically transformed in ways that allowed Copland to neutralise potential political commentary. For this Kassandra Hartford wrote:

The *Old American Songs* do not celebrate the American “folk” and the promise of their ethnic pluralism celebrated by the Left in the Popular Front era. Rather, they present a remarkably homogeneous vision of an idealized American past, unmarred by the messy conflicts of Copland’s present. Copland erases the history of manual labor and laborers [...]. He excises texts that highlight economic inequality and exploitation. [...] In its final version, *Old American Songs* reflects upon an American past that is predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and from which class conflict and ethnic tension have been erased. They tell us much about Copland’s vision of how a politically neutral “common man” for the Cold War might sound.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Fiddle-I-Fee, an otherwise traditional nonsense song***

‘I Bought Me a Cat’ is the fifth and last piece in the first set of Aaron Copland’s *Old American Songs*. As the author declared, “this version of this children’s nonsense song was sung to the composer by the American playwright Lynn Riggs, who learned it during his boyhood in Oklahoma”.<sup>92</sup>

This piece is a whimsical children’s music in the style of ‘Old MacDonald’, with a single verse repeating and adding a new animal and its call with each iteration. This compositional form, the catalogue song, was defined and analysed in a brilliant essay by Roger Renwick, *Recentering Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths*.<sup>93</sup> According to the musicologist, these are very often, as in this case, cumulative songs, meaning that an element of chorus is added to each additional verse (in this sense they can serve as tests of memory and/or endurance for their performers); delimited in time and space (whether in the past or the present, the piece focuses on a farm and its inhabitants), they do not have a story or development, which is why the order of the verses is of little importance for the purposes of the narrative; their structure is highly redundant due to the

<sup>90</sup> Hartford, *op.cit.*, p. 327

<sup>91</sup> *Ivi*, p. 341.

<sup>92</sup> COPLAND, A. *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*. Boosey & Hawkes, London. 1952. p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> RENWICK, R. *Recentering Anglo/American Folksong: Sea Crabs and Wicked Youths*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. 2001, pp. 59-91

large number of repetitions, which leave little room for elements of change between one stanza and the next: thus it is possible to understand the course of the entire piece by listening to only one or two verses.

Also called ‘Farmyard Song’, ‘I Bought Me a Cat’ is a cumulative song about farm animals originating in the British Isles and known in North America in several variants and under different titles, including ‘I Love My Rooster’, ‘I Bought Me a Horse’, ‘My Cock Crew’, ‘The Green Tree’, ‘The Barnyard Song’, and ‘There Was an Old Man of Tobago’.

Precisely because of its numerous antecedents, from a philological point of view this song presents an interesting problem: since Copland learnt it from the playwright Lynn Riggs, there is no way to identify the version used by the musician. What can be said, however, is that this nonsense song is found in many other sources. To trace the New York composer’s model, we cannot fail to note the similarities between Copland’s piece and *Bought Me a Cat* published in 1948 by Ruth Crawford Seeger in the book *American Folk Songs for Children* and recorded in 1953 on a studio album of the same name by her stepson, Pete Seeger. Even though one can tell this version is a variant of the one employed by Copland - similar words, structure, cumulative aspect, and melodic properties yet - there are both melodic and lyric differences between the two. It is true that Copland states his source as emanating from Oklahoma, while the Seeger variant originates in Arkansas. The lyrics of the song published by Copland in 1950 read:

I bought me a cat, my cat pleased me,  
I fed my cat under yonder tree.  
My cat says fiddle eye fee.

I bought me a duck, my duck pleased me,  
I fed my duck under yonder tree.  
My duck says “Quaa, quaa”,  
My cat says fiddle eye fee.

I bought me a goose, my goose pleased me,  
I fed my goose under yonder tree.  
My goose says “Quaw, quaw”,  
My duck says . . .

I bought me a hen; my hen pleased me.  
I fed my hen under yonder tree.  
My hen says “Shimmy-shack, shimmy- shack”,  
My goose says . . .

I bought me a pig; my pig pleased me.  
I fed my pig under yonder tree.  
My pig says “Griffey, griffey”.  
My hen, says . . .

I bought me a cow; my cow pleased me.  
I fed my cow under yonder tree.  
My cow says “Moo, moo”,  
My pig says . . .

I bought me a horse; my horse pleased me.  
I fed my horse under yonder tree.  
My horse says “Neigh, neigh”,  
My cow says . . .

I bought me a wife; my wife pleased me.  
I fed my wife under yonder tree.  
My wife says "Honey, honey",  
My horse says "Neigh, neigh".

Sequencing the list of animals bought by the farmer, it cannot escape the reader that the last 'animal' mentioned is a wife. A phrase born out of a patriarchal view of society, 'I bought me a wife' educated, through what was supposed to be an innocent children's song, to look upon the 'women of the house' as the most important species of domesticated animal, which men could buy and feed under a tree on a par with any farmyard beast. This is not an invention of the composer: this verse appears in several earlier versions of the song, including that one by Ruth Crawford Seeger, who wrote:

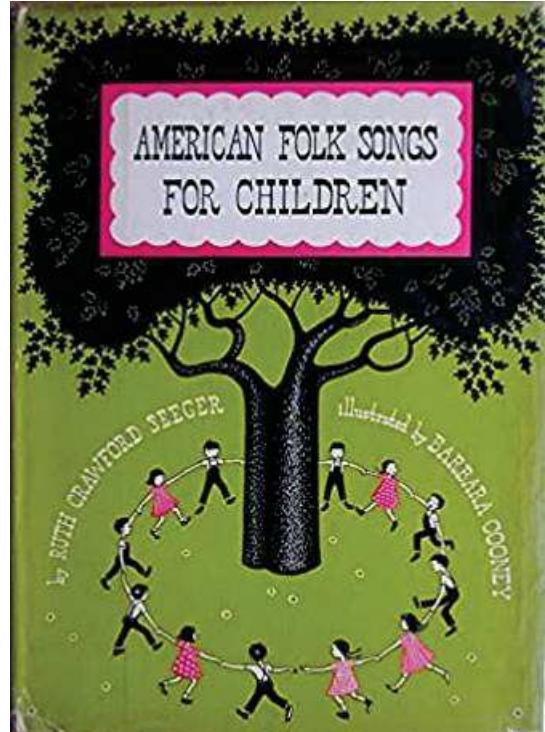
I bought me a woman; the woman pleased me.  
I fed my woman under yonder tree.  
The woman went "Honey, honey",  
The horse went 'Neigh'...

After this stanza Crawford Seeger's version featured an additional verse, which is absent from Copland's song, where the protagonist told of having bought a 'baby'. This version was retained by Pete Seeger for the 1953 recording, with the only difference that he reversed the two final stanzas.

The lyrics remained almost unchanged for several years, until it was probably realised that the message conveyed by that 'I bought me a wife/woman/baby' was particularly inappropriate. Numerous authors therefore decided to modify it by finding alternative solutions that would give the song a different meaning without subverting the compositional-musical character of the original song.

A new interpretation of this popular American children's music was given, for example, in 1979 by Diane Stanley, who published an illustrated version entitled *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Traditional American Chant*. The author decided to place at the centre of the story a little red-haired girl who, together with her cat, in the stillness of a starry night decides to cook and serve a dinner in her treehouse for her animal friends: a cat, a hen, a pig, a dog, a sheep, a turkey, a cow and a horse, all masked for the party.

In March 1988 Paul Galdone produced an illustrated version of *Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee* where, in addition to replacing the traditional 'bought' with 'had', as Stanley had done before him, following the last verse-refrain introducing the dog he added a few lines that departed from the logic of the catalogue song, and which were useful for giving a sense of conclusion to the text by introducing a whole new character:



[...] Then Grandma came  
And she fed me...  
While the others dozed  
By yonder tree.  
And cat went fiddle-i-fee.

The illustrations created by Galdone himself clearly show that the narrator of the story is a young boy who, after feeding all the animals of the farm, can enjoy a good meal when his grandmother arrives

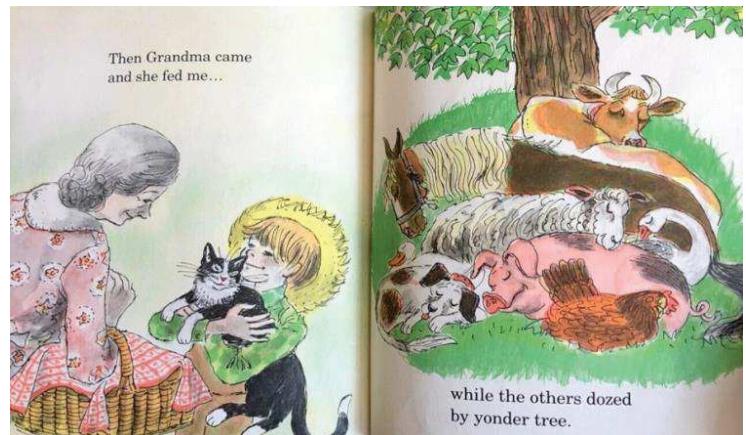


Figure 5: P. Galdone, *Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1988.



Figure 6: M. SWEET, *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Farmyard Song for the Very Young*, Little Brown & Co, Boston 1992.

Different is the illustrated version published by Melissa Sweet in 1992 under the title *Fiddle-I-Fee: A Farmyard Song for the Very Young*. A playful interpretation of this folk song features a young boy leading a growing parade of animals: with a food bucket under his arm and followed by his fiddle-playing cat, the boy gathers and leads the way for the procession across a stream, on top of a fence, through meadows and woods. Once they all get on a cart behind the farmer's tractor, they finally find themselves having a big picnic around the table together. Also, in this case the words are sung by a child, who enumerates the animals he 'had' and the characters of the wife/woman and the baby have been removed from the song, which ends instead with the verse dedicated to the cow. Also published in the same year was *A Farmyard Song* by Christopher Manson, where this old rhyme is renewed accompanied by folk art woodcuts illustrating the young protagonist who, by feeding the farm cattle, introduces each animal and its sound.

Singular, if not unique, finally, is the interpretation of *Fiddle-I-Fee* given in 2001 by Will Hillenbrand. According to tradition, the song opens with the verse dedicated to the cat:

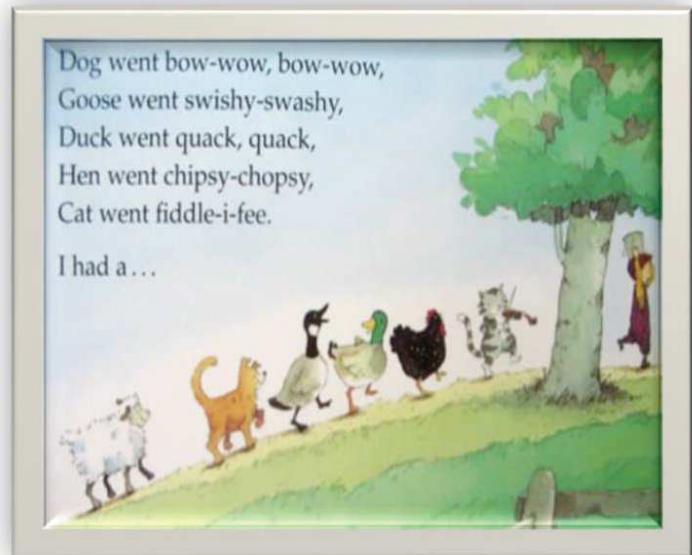


Figure 7: C. MANSON, *A Farmyard Song*, North-South, N. Y. 1992.

I had a cat,  
My cat pleased me,  
I fed my cat under yonder tree.  
My cat plays fiddle-i-fee. [...]

A peculiar aspect of this cumulative and nonsense song are the non-characteristic sounds of the barnyard, which mingle with those familiar to the many children accustomed to *Old MacDonald*. But the innovative aspect is that Hillenbrand has decided, by making minor changes to the text of the previous versions (in particular by using the verb 'to play' instead of the traditional 'to say' or 'to go'), to introduce the various inhabitants of the stable as animal-musicians, who gradually join their sound in an out-and-out symphony of onomatopoeias: the 'quaa-quaa' of the duck-oboist, the 'hum-summ' of the goose's concertina, the 'cimmy-chuk, cimmy-chuck' of the hen's washboard, the 'grify-grify' of the pig's harmonica, the 'strum-strum' of the cow playing the banjo, the 'dub-dub' of the horse's bass, and so on.

At the same time, the illustrations show a couple of peasants who, as the months go by, carry out their chores (including feeding the cattle under the tree) waiting for the birth of their baby, at the arrival of which, in conclusion, the animals all play a moonlight concert together to celebrate the happy event. Hillenbrand therefore decides to re-propose the figures of the wife and child according to a very different interpretation from that of tradition, which presented the two characters as mere elements in a list of the farmer's possessions.

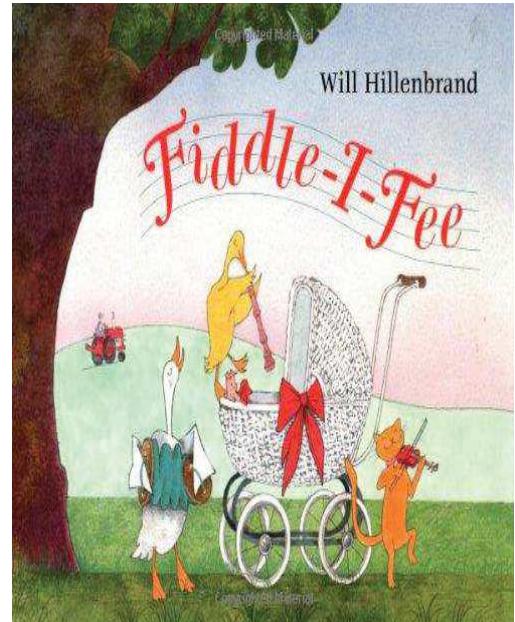


Figure 8: W. HILLENBRAND, *Fiddle-I-Fee*, Harcourt/Gulliver, San Diego, 2001.



Figure 9: A. COPLAND, *I bought me a cat*, in *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*,

From a musical point of view, however, 'I bought me a cat' is a strophic song, where Copland leaves the soloist the opportunity to impersonate the various animals while the accompaniment simulates barnyard sounds of the cat, duck, goose, hen, pig, horse, and cow.

As we can see from the score, this song playfully depicts the sounds of the various animals in the text: both in the vocal part and in the instrumental accompaniment where, in correspondence to the verse of some animals we note that Copland uses melodic and harmonic clashes. He inserts, for example, a minor second clash on the duck's 'quaa-quaa', and the goose's 'quaw-quaw', creating a funny dissonance.

It is also interesting to note that, as in other *Old American Songs* Copland, while adhering closely to the original folk melody, inserts just enough metre and tempo changes to make his music unique and sustain the audience's interest. A particular example of metre change occurs right in 'I bought me a cat', where each verse begins in 2/4 metre, changes to 3/4 metre at the animal response, and returns to 2/4 for the conclusive punchline 'my cat says fiddle-eye-fee'. The resulting uneven rhythmic flow creates an element of surprise that makes this song very dynamic and effective.

Aaron Copland's composition also differs from other farmyard songs in its musical articulation: although the lyrics are highly repetitive, as in any catalogue song, from a sonic point of view the song is animated by a continuous crescendo. As the number of animals listed by the farmer increases, so does the complexity of the musical writing (although it remains a simple children's song): after the first three stanzas accompanied by a few simple chords, in the fourth verse some acciaccaturas are added to the bass line to enrich and enliven the trend of the piece. As the music progresses, the chords and those long pauses that interspersed them at the beginning of the composition develop into groups of notes (quaver and semiquaver) that make the song increasingly singable. The animal verses are the only part of the verse that is proposed identical to itself in every repetition: composed almost exclusively of chords, only in the last verse they are dissolved into groups of dotted sixteenths, which, in line with the crescendo of the dynamics (which reaches '*fff*' in the last bars), lend liveliness and verve to the conclusion 'my cat says fiddle-eye-fee'. This ever-increasing sound is even more pronounced when listening to the orchestral version of the piece: we hear a progressive accumulation not only of farm animals but also of musical instruments, witnessing what we might call a 'bolero effect'.

The musical score consists of four staves of music for voice and piano. The lyrics are as follows:

yon - der tree My cat says fid - dle eye fee I bought me a duck my  
 duck pleased me I fed my duck un - der yon - der tree My  
 duck says "Quaa, quaa" My cat says fid - dle eye fee I  
 poco ff

Figure 10: A. COPLAND, *I bought me a cat*, in *Old American Songs: First and Second Sets*, Boosey & Hawkes, London 1952.

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